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IT WAS THE HAND OF AN ACCOMPLISHED PLAYER ON THE KEYS.

## Only a Schoolmistress; or, Her Untold Secret.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH.

### CHAPTER I.

#### JEALOUSY.

It was high noon of an August day. The blue sky was unbroken by a cloud, while the sun shone down in one of the prettiest portions of North

Devon, with an intensity that made all nature silent and languid, as a lady and gentleman, with loosened rein, rode slowly under the arching trees of a winding country road.

Both were young and handsome. The lady tall, with a commanding figure, clear, olive complexion, and well-cut features.

The gentleman, a year or so older than the lady, bore sufficient likeness to her to show relationship, only he was fairer, and had a pleasanter expression—that is, usually; for at the present moment his brows were dark and knit; while the lady's lips were curled with a scornful smile. A glance was enough to see that something had gone wrong between these two.



The lady's looks were directed straight in front.

The gentleman rode near the hedge, striking at the yet unripe blackberries with his riding-whip.

"So, then," remarked the lady, the first to break the pause, and resume the war of words, "it is your full intention to marry this girl?"

"If by 'this girl' you mean Miss Ethel Vaughan, Clarissa, such, most certainly, is my intention," was the reply.

"Most agreeable news, Duke, for your mother, who expected—what wonder?—better things from you."

"Pray, coz," broke in the gentleman, irritably, "was this ride proposed by my mother, that she might benefit by your cross-questioning?"

"If you choose to forget your own position by such an alliance, Duke," remarked the lady, with a slight shrug, "do not forget ours. My aunt would not stoop to roundabout schemes to arrive at that to which, I suppose, a straightforward question to you would instantly have received an answer."

"You are perfectly right. She had but to ask to learn the truth. I am not ashamed of it," was the quick response. "I love Ethel Vaughan. She is the most beautiful, the most amiable woman I have ever seen, and most assuredly I shall marry her, if—"

"Well, the condition?" asked his cousin, as he paused.

"If," continued the young man, gravely, "Ethel Vaughan will marry me."

"Marry you!"

And in real amaze, Clarissa turned toward the speaker. Then she burst into a laugh, which, though scornful, and a trifle hard, sounded musically in the still, summer air.

"If she would marry you?" she repeated. "As if she, the village schoolmistress, would refuse!"

"She might," remarked Duke Sterndale, curtly; for, to his misery, he was conscious that Ethel Vaughan had almost done so already. "All women are not alike. There are some who have too much self-respect to scheme for, and sell themselves for title or position, putting love out of the question."

Again his cousin's looks turned upon him, sharply searching.

Had he divined her secret—that it was her very affection for him, her desire to be mistress of the Hall, that made her so vindictive toward Ethel Vaughan?

His expression answered her in the negative. Indeed, Marmaduke Sterndale was one of the least conceited men going.

"She is a paragon, no doubt," remarked the lady, mockingly.

"In my opinion—yes," was the calm reply. "No woman more fitted to be the mistress of Sterndale Hall."

"Duke, you are infatuated—mad!" broke in Clarissa, her scorn replaced by sudden vehemence. "What are this girl's antecedents? You are utterly ignorant respecting them."

"And am equally indifferent. It is sufficient that she is the orphan daughter of a clergyman, and is now without kith or kin. Therefore, in marrying her, I should have the satisfaction of knowing that I should not afterward be annoyed by either poor or disreputable relations."

"Yes, if Ethel Vaughan might be trusted."

"I could trust, or should not wish to wed her."

"Have a care, Duke!" ejaculated Clarissa. "The earth does not produce weeds more quickly than a wealthy marriage, poor relations."

"Thanks for the warning, cousin," smiled the young man, with placid confidence. "In the present case, I am quite willing to take my chance."

"May you never repent it," remarked Clarissa, with difficulty keeping the rage agitating her from appearing in her voice.

The words had risen to her lips, and she had spoken, but was far from feeling them.

If her cousin Duke carried out this piece of absurdity, as she termed it, from her very heart she hoped he would have cause to repent it, and very bitterly.

As if to end the conversation, which for her had so little charm, she touched her horse sharply with her whip, and took the incline they were ascending at a gallop.

Reaching the crest, however, she again slackened speed, and a pang shot through her heart as her gaze rested on the scene before her.

At the foot of the hill, on the banks of a lovely lake, which reflected it in its silvery bosom like glass, stood a castellated old Hall—gray and ancient as the trees that extended their hoary branches, lichen festooned, near.

Barons and Templar knights might, at one time, have feasted in the long hall connecting the east and west wings; warders have watched from turret and tower; or cross-bowmen sent many a deadly bolt at an advancing enemy. But for the last two centuries it had been the property of the Sterndales—a well-born, influential country family, whose last direct male descendant was represented in the person of Duke Sterndale.

The latter's father had been twice married. His first wife he had wedded rather to please his parents than himself.

Duke had been the sole fruit of the union; when Mrs. Sterndale, a year later, fell a victim to diphtheria.

The widower had remained one for eighteen months, after which time he had wedded his first and, it was said, his only love—his cousin May.

The issue of this marriage was a daughter, who, to the parents' grief, died at the age of nine.

Mrs. Sterndale, whose affection had been passionate and intense, felt the blow the most keenly; while a feeling of jealousy long had reigned in her breast against Duke, as if it had been a wrong done that he should survive while her bright darling had perished.

She, in a measure, outgrew this injustice, but could never entirely overcome it; and when her favorite sister, Mrs. Harfield, died, she adopted the sister's daughter, Clarissa. The girl filled a void in her heart—a maternal pride and craving that her step-son would never have been able to satisfy.

With Clarissa Harfield it had been very different. Brought up with Duke, she had looked up to and, loved him as an elder brother; but as she entered the charming period of maidenhood, she had become aware of an affection for him even surpassing that.

When he was at college, the Hall was dull—depressing; when he came home, it was paradise.

Her love, as her hope, had been fostered by two circumstances—the secret desire of her aunt for such union, and the kind, almost chivalric, attention of her cousin.

Beautiful, accomplished, universally admired, Clarissa felt small fear but that her affection would be returned, and the Hall which was then her home would remain so throughout her life.

This bright prospect had, however, been suddenly darkened by the appearance of Ethel Vaughan, the newly-appointed village schoolmistress.

All in a hurry, the elderly lady who had held that post for fifteen years had had to resign through illness; and, all in a hurry, the rector had been recommended, and had been glad to accept, the services of Miss Vaughan.

But Eaglehurst was rather taken by surprise on Ethel Vaughan's arrival, as was the rector himself, who, a good-natured man, had gone to meet her at the railway station.

He had had some experience with village schoolmistresses; had seen them of all descriptions, so was prepared for much; but certainly not for the graceful creature who descended from a second-class carriage onto the platform, and glanced with a helpless, bewildered expression, as if in search of some one or something.

The slight figure was attired in a plain black cloth toilet, which made the fair complexion and golden hair, looped up beneath the black hat, yet more refined and dazzling.

The features were exquisitely formed, and despite the nervousness of her present manner, there was an air about Miss Vaughan that denoted one well-educated and used to good society.

The rector, on his part, was a trifle nervous, as approaching, with raised hat, he introduced himself.

"I decided to meet you, Miss Vaughan," he remarked, explaining his presence. "I thought you might feel strange."

"Thank you, sir—oh, so much!—for taking the trouble," answered the schoolmistress. "I did feel rather bewildered. The place is new to me, and not well lighted—is it?"

"No. We are economical of gas in Eaglehurst," laughed the rector, looking down at his companion, more and more perplexed.

What, he mentally queried, could have made one of her evident position, and with her youth and beauty, select such an existence as a country schoolmistress?

"I understood, Miss Vaughan, that you were over twenty," he almost unconsciously blurted forth.

"I am twenty-two," she replied; "but do not look nineteen, every one tells me. It is because I am so fair. It is much against me as a teacher; but I hope, sir, you will not think so."

"If? Certainly not, my dear—that is, Miss Vaughan. Our mind and capacity must be judged by our years, not our looks."

Nevertheless, as the rector escorted the new schoolmistress to her new home—a red-brick, one-story building, with whitewashed walls, neat and trim as a Quakeress—he felt very much like a man who had made a mistake, and was ignorant as yet of its extent.

"A great deal too pretty, and too young," he reflected. "Indeed, not at all like the usual governess."

Almost nervously he had introduced Ethel Vaughan to her future home, as if it were any thing but worthy of her.

"There is one of the elder girls—Bridget Jepps," he said, "who will act as your servant, Miss Vaughan. A nice, handy lass; and—and"—with a glance round the plain, rather frigid little sitting-room, with its Scriptural prints and texts—"I hope you will like it. I trust you will not be dull."

"Thank you very much. I know I shall like it, and am certain not to be dull," she answered. "On the contrary, I feel I shall be very, very happy, if I can but succeed in giving satisfaction."

And the rector would have fully believed the assertion had he seen the expression of exceeding joy and peace that came over Ethel Vaughan's features when alone, and heard the murmured words, "Thank Heaven I feel safe—safe at last! Surely, I have destroyed all trace? No one could find me here?"

But the rector saw and heard none of this, which certainly would have added to his doubts and perplexity.

"I wonder," he pondered, as he went, his hands clasped behind his back, up the road to the rectory, "what Eaglehurst's opinion will be respecting this matter?"

Eaglehurst's opinion, after its first general surprise, proved diverse. The most generous felt compassion that one so evidently a lady should be so reduced. The ungenerous regarded such a "person" as Ethel Vaughan burying herself in so humble a capacity at Eaglehurst as a mystery. The scandal-mongers declared there was something dark about it, and demanded of the rector what character he had received with her—what were her antecedents?

The clergyman rather curtly told all he knew. She was the orphan daughter of a curate, had neither kith nor kin, and had been recommended to him by a highly respectable Government training school.



But Eaglehurst had yet further to be astonished. The schoolmistress was expected to know music enough to act as organist and teach the children to sing in the choir. Consequently, the first Sunday was always one of curiosity to the congregation. Particularly was it so on this occasion.

A breathless silence reigned in the sacred edifice when the hymn was given out. Then the organ pealed forth; the young teacher's and her pupils' voices rose; the hearers gave a gasp.

Could those rich, full notes come really from their old organ? Was this the old, humdrum, monotonous hymn to which they had been accustomed? It was the hand of an accomplished player on the keys. It was the accent of a cultivated voice that led the sweet tones of the children in their hymn of praise.

The mystery naturally was increased fourfold. Who could the new schoolmistress be?

But, after all, it proved not much more than a nine days' wonder. Ethel Vaughan's quiet habits, her retiring disposition, soon won their way, and Eaglehurst got used to the slight, girlish figure, always clad so neatly in dark stuffs, with plain linen collar and cuffs, that went through the place so unobtrusively, fulfilled her duties so thoroughly, and was ever ready to do a kindness to any one.

Three months, however, had not elapsed before a rumor was circulated which made the young girl again the subject of conversation. This was no less than that Duke Sterndale, the squire, was seriously in love with Ethel Vaughan; and for once, at least, rumor spoke truth. Duke Sterndale did love her, and was quite ready to avow it, as he had done, to his cousin Clarissa, during their morning ride.

All the above came rushing back in bitter remembrance to Miss Harfield, as she gazed with contracted lip, and fury in her heart, at the old Hall, and its reflection in the mirror-like lake.

She, Ethel Vaughan, a village schoolmistress, a nobody—at least, a mystery—the mistress of Sterndale!

Yes, a mystery, and a suspicious one, suggestive of hidden evil. There must, Clarissa felt assured, be some grave cause why one so accomplished should accept so humble a part in life.

"Oh, if I could but discover this girl's secret—for I am certain she has one! If I only could!" she reflected, as once again she increased her speed, and, almost heedless of her cousin, rode to the Hall.

She only halted on reaching the broad stone steps of the latter, where a groom was in attendance to take the horses to the stables.

Clarissa had never felt so angry with Duke, and would have preferred the servant's aid to dismount; but the young squire was too quick, and she too proud to show her temper by refusing his assistance.

"Are you coming in to luncheon?" she asked, coldly, as she gathered up the long skirt of her riding-habit.

"No, thanks," he answered. "I should have small appetite, and, I fancy, little welcome. I will leave you to confirm my mother's—fear, I think you termed it; but I shall be back to dinner."

So saying, he ran down the steps, and crossed the grounds in the direction of Eaglehurst.

Clarissa Harfield, watching him, bit her red, ripe lips until the blood almost started, while her looks flashed scorn and ire.

"Of course, it is Wednesday, the schoolmistress's half-day freedom from her drudgery," she reflected, sneeringly. "He has gone to see her. Oh, how I hate her! How I begin to hate even *him*!"

Then, turning, she passed beneath the large arched entrance, and crossed the marble-paved hall to the dining-room.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE NEWSPAPER PARAGRAPH.

THE school studies were over. With a shout and a rush, the pupils had trooped away in the

warm air and sunshine. A blank, a stillness, had abruptly fallen over the school-room, where the young teacher, Ethel Vaughan, sat now alone.

Her countenance was pale, and her hand supported her head, her elbow resting on her desk. The atmosphere, rendered close by the many assembled, was gradually being purified by the soft summer breeze, which came wafted in across the roses on the sill of the open window. All was still save for the musical hum of the bees outside among the flowers.

"It's tiring work teaching," murmured the young schoolmistress, finally leaning back in her chair, and glancing round, "especially such uncongenial pupils. The children are good children. It is not their fault; but one feels one's education thrown away—not only one's education, but life, too. Ah me—ah me!"

The soft tones had become tinged with bitterness, and as the schoolmistress ended, she dropped her face with a moaning sigh on her slender hands.

In a moment, however, she rose quickly, exclaiming, in self-reproach, "This is, indeed, ungrateful to complain. Is not my present lot better than I could have hoped? Is not my very mode of life my security—its humbleness my safeguard from discovery and"—she shivered before she added, almost in a whisper—"disgrace? Let me be thankful for that, at least."

Throwing off her depression, she busied herself by collecting and putting away the dog-eared primers and shabby copybooks, which their careless owners, eager for freedom, had left about.

If the duties were uncongenial to Ethel Vaughan, surely was she to that cold, white-washed room. Her attire was of the plainest, but the slim, well-carried figure imparted to it a charming grace, while the pretty head with its curls of golden hair, rested on the firm, white throat with a dignity even easier than Clarissa Harfield's own.

To conquer the depression possessing her, Ethel tried to hum a tune; but a sadness yet for some moments lingered on her features. Gradually, however, thoughts arose that dispelled it.

"I am ungrateful to complain," she murmured; "for had I never come to Eaglehurst, should I have ever met Duke Sterndale? Yet, after all, better that we had remained strangers; for what can he ever be to me, or I to him?" Once more she covered her face, while a shiver ran through her figure standing in the school-room flooded by an August sunshine. Then the small hands dropped and clenched, a strange, half-despairing, half-angry expression rested on the delicate features as she added, "Oh, it is unjust! The world is very cruel. What have I done that I should suffer—that the disgrace should fall on my shoulders, cutting me off from my kind—condemning me to renounce happiness—to pass solitary, alone through life, when I might be so happy? It is too hard, too cruel!"

Her anger broke down, a sob burst from her lips, tears trembled on the long silken lashes.

But suddenly they were driven back, as Ethel Vaughan, white as a ghost, staggered, catching the table for support.

"That voice!" she gasped, trembling in every limb. "Surely it cannot be imagination! No; there it is again!"

Leaning breathlessly forward, she listened. She had been startled by a man's voice speaking outside the window. It now sounded once more, and Ethel's face cleared somewhat as she listened.

In a moment, softly she approached the casement, and cautiously glanced through the rose-trees.

A man and woman stood conversing just outside the palings. As Ethel's eyes rested on the former, the revulsion of feeling from evident alarm to relief was so great, that she laughed hysterically.

"How foolish!" she thought. "It must have been imagination. The voices are not at all

alike. Besides, how could *he* be here? It is impossible, thank Heaven!"

The last two words were uttered very fervently.

When the man whose voice had startled her passed on, Ethel Vaughan went to her room, and, putting on her hat and mantle, quitted the school-house by the back entrance.

The young schoolmistress had one delight at Eaglehurst—the organ. It was not a very good one, but it was better than not any, and Ethel generally spent some hours of her half-holidays practicing in the organ-loft.

The back gate of the school garden opened into a narrow, retired lane, bordered by hawthorn hedges, a quarter of a mile down which was the sexton's cottage, where the church keys were kept.

Having procured them, Ethel went on to a turn in the lane, where a stile, arched by a pollard oak, led into the quiet, shady graveyard, surrounding the gray, ivy-covered Norman church.

At the first jingle of the keys Ethel carried, a man rose up from the step on the other side of the stile, and faced round, waiting.

A few seconds after, the young schoolmistress reached the place. As she became aware of the other's presence, she drew slightly back, the color on her cheek heightened, while she exclaimed, "Mr. Sterndale here! This is wrong!"

"Indeed, it is, Miss Vaughan!" laughed Duke, extending his hand to assist her across, which, however, she did not heed. "You are fully a quarter of an hour later than usual. It is cruel so to test my patience."

"I asked you, Mr. Sterndale," retorted Ethel, gravely, refusing to notice his lighter humor, "not to meet me here again."

"And I, Ethel," answered the young man, with sudden earnestness, "told you I could not promise that. I *must* see you; you know I must!"

"I threw myself on your generosity, and thought, then, that I was safe."

"You put my generosity to too hard a test," he answered. "Safe, Ethel? Can you from your heart say that you do not feel safe in my presence?"

"You know what I mean, Mr. Sterndale," she said, standing at one side of the stile, while he remained at the other. "People will begin to talk. Indeed, you know they have begun already."

"And what care I?" he broke in impetuously.

"But I must—I do! You forget, Mr. Sterndale, the burden falls on me, not you."

"Ethel"—and he was over the stile by her side, her hand in his—"what right have you to care—to heed the talk of any one? Bemine—my wife, Ethel—and in our happiness we may laugh at all the world!"

"This is adding cruelty to cruelty!" pleaded the schoolmistress, controlling her voice with difficulty. "Be more humane, Mr. Sterndale. Have I not already answered you?"

"He, despite her attempt to resist, had now got possession of both her hands, and was fondly gazing down upon her.

"Yes," he rejoined, with a tremor in his voice, yet firm decision in his tones. "you have refused me, Ethel—refused my affection; yet owning that I have your love. You have told me you cannot be my wife, and I have answered you, my darling, that I will not believe it—that I will not accept a refusal. Send me from you with scorn; say you hate me, and I will go. But, Ethel, until you do that, I will hope!"

Send him away with scorn! Say she hated him! As if she ever could do that! Especially at this moment when he stood there so frank, so handsome, so noble, so resolute in his love, the depth of which the tremor in his voice told so plainly.

"It is not wise," she murmured.

"They say"—and now he laughed lightly—"that men in love never display wisdom in their actions. I do not wish to be an exception. Listen, Ethel! I will tell you why I



came to-day. Yesterday you half refused me."

"Quite, Mr. Sterndale," she interpolated.

"No," shaking his head persistently; "half. I discovered, Ethel, that I had your love. That some absurd notion of difference in our position made you say 'No,' when I would relinquish every shilling I possess to hear you say 'Yes.' So, I have resolved to find out who will tire first. I to sue, you to reject. We will be friends—until the moment arrives when I shall say, 'Ethel, dearest, will you be my wife?—a title, I swear, no other than you shall ever own! And you, placing your hand in mine, shall answer 'Yes,' or let me read my happiness in your eyes!'"

"I fear, Mr. Sterndale," retorted Ethel, shaking her pretty head, "our hair will be gray before that hour arrives!"

"I will wait even until then, Ethel, if then I may call you mine! Is it agreed?—friends, good friends, while I am trying to win you?"

"Yes," she replied; "why not? There can be no harm in that. Now, please, let me go on to the church!"

He made no effort to detain her, but helped her across the stile. Only he went also, walking by her side through the green mounds, opening the small side church door for her, and seeing her into the organ-loft.

Then he descended, and Ethel heard the reverberation of his steps down the aisle.

No sooner was she alone than the schoolmistress gave way to her emotion.

None but herself knew how difficult the grave composure she had assumed had been to maintain.

Yes; Duke Sterndale was right. She did love him, and had refused him for the reason he had said.

Was it the real one?

At any rate, Ethel Vaughan had told her own heart that Duke and she could never be other than friends.

She was aroused by the "clump, clump," of the heavy boots of the boy the sexton had sent to blow the bellows for the young organist; and, soon after, the quaint old Norman church echoed with the notes of the organ, which seemed never to have discoursed so well before.

An hour and a half passed; then Ethel Vaughan quitted the loft, and descended, leaving the boy to lock the door.

As she issued into the churchyard, she found Duke Sterndale in the porch.

"Do not blame me for being here," he said, apologetically. "It is your own fault, Ethel. You began to play before I was out of hearing; then to go was impossible. To-day you surpassed yourself—you seemed inspired. I never could have imagined any one could have brought such sounds from our old organ."

"It has been a good one," smiled Ethel, "and yet retains some of its past merits."

"Nevertheless, I have, within the last hour, resolved to present the church with a new one," he remarked, as they strolled toward the stile. "Ethel, if you will not accept presents from me—if you will not let me do anything to make your home—your life more comfortable, I will do so in a way you cannot refuse, and in a way, too, that I know will please you."

"You are very kind, Mr. Sterndale!" she replied, with a little emotion. "I wish I could better prove my gratitude!"

"I can wait—wait until our hair is gray!" laughed Duke, pleasantly, as he again assisted her over the stile, for he respected her wish that he should no further accompany her. "Stay!" he added, as she was about to move away; "I had forgotten this!"

As he spoke, he drew from his pocket a newspaper.

The young schoolmistress had once remarked, casually, the pleasure she had had from a newspaper, though an old one, that the rector had lent her; since which time Duke had kept her supplied daily.

As he extended it, their hands met, and for a moment the Squire held Ethel's.

It seemed as if the paper united them!

Was it really to do so?

How little did either know the effect the contents were to produce, though Duke had read nearly every line?

"The time for saying 'Yes!' has not arrived yet, Ethel!" he smiled.

"Not yet!" she laughed.

Then they parted.

Reaching the school-house, Ethel Vaughan went at once to her room to remove her hat and mantle. Then, taking Duke's paper from the toilet-table, she was about to leave the apartment, when she was attracted by the heading of a paragraph—"Escape of Two Convicts from Portland."

Ethel's color forsook her cheeks. Unable to stand, she sunk into a chair. A faintness seized her.

But, in a moment, eagerly she opened the paper—how it rustled in her trembling hands!—and hurriedly read the paragraph.

It recounted how two convicts, during a thick mist that had rolled up from the sea, had eluded the vigilance of the warders, and effected their escape. Their absence had not been discovered for some hours. As soon as known, the cannon signals were fired, and a pursuit commenced, with at present but partial success. One of the unfortunate men had not long enjoyed the sweets of liberty. He was found dead, face downward, among the rocks, having fallen evidently from a considerable height. By his number he was known to be the convict Edward Vaughan, sentenced for life. The other, Gerald Ainsley, was still at large, although it was expected he would be captured before night.

Ethel read the above, each letter of which seemed to burn itself into her brain, then faltered, "Unhappy man! a bad end to a bad life! Dead! Well, better for him—far better. 'And,' she added, rising, her countenance expressive of great relief, "better for me! Surely I have no cause to grieve! Tears, could I shed them, would be hypocrisy, for am I not safe? The past is dead; none now live to call it into life! I am free! The heavy burden of my miserable secret is taken from my shoulders!"

Lifting the paper from the floor on which it had fallen, she cut out the account of the escape, and hid it in her desk; then, destroying the other pages, descended to her little sitting-room with an expression that for long had not rested on her features. She even, like the convict, Gerald Ainsley, seemed to have escaped the fetters that for nearly three years had bound her thoughts, her actions, her life, and was once more breathing the pure air of freedom!

### CHAPTER III.

#### DESPAIR AND VICTORY.

WHEN Clarissa Harfield entered the dining-room, she found luncheon waiting, and her aunt seated in the large bay window, languidly busy with her crewels.

Mrs. Sterndale was a fair woman of between fifty and sixty, with high, aristocratic features, a due appreciation of her own comforts, and a temper irritable and irritating—especially so to her niece, whose character was both decided and energetic.

The loss of her child, then her husband, had removed the only two objects that could win Mrs. Sterndale from herself. After that, she would have taken life very easily, so long as her own comforts were respected, had it not been for the plans she had formed for her niece's future. She loved her almost as she had loved her own darling, whose place Clarissa filled; and nothing seemed so natural as that Duke should wed Clarissa, and thus make the Hall her home forever.

The contrary opinion her son tacitly expressed produced the one distressing element of her existence. Indeed, Mrs. Sterndale had been moved nearer to real passion than ever before in all her life by the rumor which Clarissa took care she should hear—that her step-son had so far forgotten what was due to his position and

the race of Sterndale as to be truly and honorably in love with Ethel Vaughan, the schoolmistress.

"It can't be true, Clarissa. It is absurd, downright nonsense!" she had exclaimed. "Ethel Vaughan is pretty and ladylike, and Duke may be flirting with her; but as to love—serious love, I mean—it is all folly. I'll never believe it. Duke knows better what is due to himself; also what is due to me."

"Suppose, aunt, you were to ask him himself respecting his attentions to this girl?" said the niece.

Duke was one of the most attentive of sons; but Mrs. Sterndale felt that in any grave matter she would have small power of influencing him. Perhaps it was her own fault when she visited upon him the loss of her little Maud. At any rate, she did not feel disposed to have her comfort disturbed by a scene in which she surmised that her maternal authority, though respected, would lack influence, so she answered, "The most absurd proceeding possible that would be, my dear Rissa. If, as I am sure is the case, Duke is only flirting, as young men will, with a pretty girl, my regarding the matter seriously would make him do so. In fact, it might drive him to take the step we fear. A scene would ensue, which, really, my nerves could not support."

Clarissa Harfield bit her red lips to keep down her anger before she could reply; then, "But I think you ought to know, aunt, when all Eaglehurst makes common talk of it."

"Eaglehurst would make common talk of anything for a change in its monotonous existence. It is all the rector's fault," proceeded Mrs. Sterndale, irritably. "I told him so. Miss Vaughan was far too pretty and distinguished-looking to be selected for the post she fills. But he said he couldn't help it, and the thing was done. Dear me, it's all very tiresome."

"Yes, it's done," remarked Clarissa, scornfully, through her contracted lips. "And I suppose you and I, my dear aunt, may prepare to remove into the Dower House, to make room here for the future mistress of Sterndale."

"Nonsense, Rissa; don't talk like that. I repeat, Duke would never dream of such a marriage seriously. But I will tell you what—to-morrow he is going to ride with you to Ulmbrook; surely you, my love, who are so much cleverer than, and not so nervous as I, might manage to get at Duke's real intentions."

So it had been arranged, and the result has been seen.

When her niece entered, Mrs. Sterndale raised her head quickly.

"Where is Duke?" she asked.

"Need you ask, aunt?" replied Clarissa, mockingly, as, plucking off her riding gloves, she threw them on a side-table. "Is not this Miss Vaughan's half-holiday? Where should Duke be but helping her to pass it agreeably?"

"Rissa," ejaculated Mrs. Sterndale, grasping the arms of her chair and half rising, "you do not mean—"

"That I have sounded Duke as you desired, aunt, and have to inform you that his attentions to the girl are most serious, and that he openly declared it his purpose to marry her, if she will have him."

"This cannot be. Rissa, you have irritated him. He has said this only to vex you. It can't be true."

"Aunt," exclaimed Clarissa, in quick, decided tones, what is the use of saying that things that are can't be? Don't blind yourself to facts. Duke loves, or believes he loves, Ethel Vaughan, and would marry her to-morrow if she would have him."

"If—if—" echoed Mrs. Sterndale. "As if she—she would refuse!"

"Duke says she has refused him," replied the niece, shrugging her shoulders. She stood in the bay window, her hat not yet removed, and twisting her riding-whip in her white hands, as her dark eyes were fixed upon the parterre of brilliant flower-beds outside.

"In that case, it is but the refusal of a co-



quette, in order to make Duke more eager," cried the lady irritably. "Duke, the representative of the Sterndales, so to disgrace himself, to wed a village schoolmistress, whose pay is forty pounds a year, with house, coals, and candle! It must not be. It shall not be."

"Aunt,"—and her niece turning, confronted her—"what is to prevent it? Do you fancy your word will? You know Duke. He is not likely to be turned from any course he holds to be right, and for his own happiness."

"But is he so selfish, Rissa, that he will not think of our happiness? Imagine that girl ruling here at the Hall!"

"I can imagine it, aunt, easily," was the reply. "Do not let us blind ourselves to the truth that Ethel Vaughan would not look out of place here. Far more in it than in her present position. By appearance, manners, education, she is a lady. The question for us to consider is why, this being so, she has buried herself here at Eaglehurst, where her talent and education are wasted?"

"Exactly. Why?" remarked Mrs. Sterndale, helplessly regarding her niece.

"Ah, if we could but find that out, it might stop this marriage at once. Aunt, as sure as we are in this room, there is some mystery in that girl's history—something disgraceful, if not terrible, that she hides."

"It is possible, Rissa; but what is the good if we cannot discover what it is? This only makes matters worse. Imagine, if there be disgrace attached to this girl's antecedents, and it is only found out after Duke has married her! It would be fearful."

Fearful or no, Clarissa Harfield registered a mental vow, there and then, that it should be the one set purpose of her life to ascertain Ethel Vaughan's past history, and make it public, whether she were Duke's wife or not. Why should she respect the peace and happiness of the man who had slighted her for another?

Such was not her nature.

When Duke returned, he found his step-mother alone in the drawing-room, though the first dressing-bell had not yet sounded. His cousin's absence, and the expression of Mrs. Sterndale's usually placid countenance, warned him of what was pending.

But Clarissa was correct in thinking her aunt's will would have little influence over her step-son. He considered the course he was taking was not wrong; so instantly prepared for the coming interview, not, on the whole, sorry to get it over, and resolved it should not be of long duration.

"My dear Duke," said the lady, her tones sounding a trifle constrained from the effort to conceal her nervousness, "what is this report that is going about Eaglehurst? I never place credence in rumors, and I should be the last to do so in this."

"Rumors, on the whole, are not generally credible," answered Duke, quietly, "though from experience, I should say that, as a rule, they have some foundation to go upon."

"I trust that you do not mean this one has, Duke? I will not believe it until I hear it from your own lips."

"You have not yet informed me, mother, what is this rumor," he began; but, suddenly changing his manner, proceeded, "There! it is absurd to beat about the bush, dear mother. My conversation with Clarissa to day shows me to what you refer—my love for Ethel Vaughan."

"Your love, Duke?"

"My sincere and honorable love."

"You are jesting—you wish to anger me?"

"Heaven forgive me if I could do that on so grave a matter!" replied the young man fervently. "Rumor has told you rightly, mother. I love Ethel Vaughan, and I pray that one day she may be my wife."

"Duke,"—and Mrs. Sterndale rose from her chair—"do you remember who you are?"

"My father's son, and a Sterndale, who will never disgrace this roof by giving it an unworthy mistress," was the quick response.

"Have a care!" proceeded his step-mother,

trembling with anger and a nervous sense of her own weakness. "What is this girl? A village schoolmistress; hence no match for you. Worse still; who is she? You know nothing."

"I know this. Her father was a clergyman, who, dying suddenly, left her penniless, friendless, kinless," exclaimed Duke. "I know that bravely she set to work to make an honest livelihood. I know her, as all do in Eaglehurst, to be a lady, and I ask no more than this with my wife."

"You know all this from her own lips. Is it likely, if there were evil behind, she would confess it?"

"I trust her, mother. If I could not, I should not wed her."

"Mad, blind infatuation!" remarked the lady. "Duke, if you wed this girl, I will never—"

"Mother," broke in the step-son, gravely taking her hand, "say nothing rashly. Listen to me. We have been always the best of friends. Let us continue to be so. Be wise. I will be governed by your desires in much; but cannot in this. My whole happiness rests on Ethel Vaughan. I cannot have it wrecked. One day I hope to see her seated here as my wife. She is very, very dear to me; but my love for her shall never lessen the respect and affection I feel for my father's widow."

This was the worst of it. Duke had a manner and tone which Mrs. Sterndale, hating scenes and exertion, could never withstand. She began to cry.

"It is very terrible, Duke! It makes me very wretched! I am disappointed! I did hope your selection would have been very different. Cl—"

"Hush, mother! For my cousin's sake, I fancy you had better not proceed. From me she shall ever receive the affection of a brother. The Hall, if she pleases, until she weds, shall continue to be her home."

Duke had led Mrs. Sterndale back to her seat, and was leaning over her thus, the lady's eyes being covered by her pocket-handkerchief; neither saw the tall, graceful figure of Clarissa Harfield, as she glided away from outside the window behind a group of syringas.

"I live at Sterndale to play second to Ethel Vaughan," she thought, her lips white, her small hands clenched in passion. "Never! I would rather act as schoolmistress myself! Ah! if aunt had only my spirit, Duke should not have had so easy a victory. But she is as selfish as weak. As long as her comfort is cared for, all the rest may go!"

Meanwhile, Mrs. Sterndale had proceeded: "And when, Duke, do—do you think of marrying? It is right I should know. There is the Dower House to prepare. If we are to be friends, it will be wiser for us to live apart."

"Perhaps, mother, you are not wrong," replied her step-son, his handsome brows slightly contracting. "All I can say is, you shall be the first to learn. So far, Miss Vaughan has refused me, and I have refused to be refused. I shall continue to woo; so it will rest upon who yields first."

"Thank Heaven!" thought the step-mother. "Then there is a hope it may come to nothing, after all, and Clarissa may still have a chance."

At that moment the dinner dressing bell sounded, and neither mother nor son were loth to seize the excuse for putting an end to their interview.

When Duke returned to the drawing-room, Clarissa was already there, standing by the flowers at the window. At the sound of his step, she looked up with a bright smile.

"Do you want a bouquet for your coat, Duke?" she inquired. "Here is one." She held it toward him, adding in a lower tone, "I think I lost my temper rather to-day. Forgive me, Duke."

"Forgive you, Rissa? I have nothing to forgive. I only regret that the subject should have annoyed you."

"If it did," she responded, with a slight

shrug, "it has ceased to do so. You are your own master, Duke; and if aunt can say 'Yes,' what right have I to say 'No'?"

"Upon my word, matters are going far better than I hoped!" reflected the young man, with an elation of spirits, as he secured the flowers in his button hole, and the butler announced dinner.

The Saturday after, Duke Sterndale again stood at the church-yard stile waiting for the young organist. It was a calm, roseate summer afternoon. The insects hummed drowsy requiems among the flowers planted by loving hands upon the graves; the birds twittered in harmony in the branches of the tall trees; while now and again a rook, with deep caw, would sail across the blue sky to or from the Sterndale rookery.

There was a sense of peace, of happiness over all which influenced Duke's heart. That feeling many experience, but which none can explain, possessed his senses—the feeling that some gladness was on its way to him.

The moments flew by. Again the rooks appeared in their circling flight. The insects hummed; the birds twittered; the church clock struck two.

Ethel Vaughan was late. Would she come? What would detain her?

Another quarter of an hour. Still not here. Was she staying away to avoid meeting him? No; his countenance brightened. She was coming at last. He could hear the faint jingle of the church keys. Only Ethel's voice could have been sweeter music.

As the young girl, coming in sight, beheld him, a flush rose to her cheek; something like a smile hovered over her lip.

Heaven alone knew the struggle that had been going on in the young schoolmistress's heart since that Wednesday. The sleepless nights; the graceful figure prone on the floor in her agony of doubt—in her desire to do right; of her craving to accept the only happiness this world had to give her—Duke Sterndale's love.

Finally, Ethel Vaughan had decided, crying, "Oh, Heaven, pardon me if I err; but I cannot help it! My love is stronger than I! Have I not borne enough already in the past? Why should it ruin my future? I am young, and love, and am beloved. No; I cannot bear it! I cannot thrust longer away the joy that is offered. Why should I? Mine was not the sin! I am alone! The past is dead—buried! Why should I resuscitate it?"

What was it in Ethel Vaughan's face that made Duke forget to chide her from her lateness? What was it that made his pulses beat, as he assisted her across the stile, and caused him, extending his hand, to whisper, "Ethel, dearest, has the time arrived?"

The schoolmistress paused. For a space that fierce struggle reigned; then, with bowed head and tremulous tones, she answered faintly, "I am not worthy—indeed I am not! Who am I that I should be your wife?"

"You are the only woman I have ever loved, my darling!" he answered, fervently. "The only woman who shall ever bear that title. Of your worthiness I am content to be the judge, Ethel." And he drew her to his heart with a great joy. "The time has arrived. I see it in your looks."

She did not say "No," nor resist the arms that so lovingly encircled her. Yet a shiver ran through her frame, as the idea would force itself upon her, "I who have not sinned before—am I sinning now?"

Duke only reached the Hall in time to make a hurried toilet for dinner. As he threw off his morning coat, he did not notice the newspaper that fell from the pocket. It was the one he had taken for Ethel, but which, in his new happiness, he had forgotten to give.

"What great events from little causes spring."

Descending to the drawing-room, he found his step-mother already there. He believed her to be alone, not perceiving Clarissa standing just outside the window.

"My dear mother," he said, trying to keep



his elation within bounds, as he advanced and took her hand, "my happiness has come to me sooner than I expected. As I promised, you are the first I tell. In a month, Ethel Vaughan will be my wife."

Every syllable had reached Clarissa. Her lips tightened with fury, a red light shone in her handsome eyes. Her white, slender fingers rent the leaves of the delicate tiny bouquet, a moment back destined for Duke's coat, to atoms, and cast them on the gravel.

"So," she reflected, bitterly, "it is to be! I am to give place to this girl! But wait. Something makes me feel that sooner or later my turn will come to be revenged on him and her!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE SHORT CUT ACROSS THE FIELDS.

OVER a twelvemonth has elapsed, and there are some changes at Sterndale. Mrs. Sterndale and her niece have long taken up their abode at the Dower House, a mile distant, to make room for the new mistress of the Hall.

The young schoolmistress in her new capacity has won favor everywhere. The gentry have gladly accepted graceful, beautiful, amiable Mrs. Sterndale as one of themselves; while the poor, the recipients of her charity, adore her.

Even the dowager Mrs. Sterndale would have followed with the rest of Eaglehurst, and found it no gall to her pride to have remained at the Hall, but for the influence of Clarissa.

Too idle to care for exertion, she allowed herself almost unconsciously to be guided by her niece, the wounded pride in whose heart was none the nearer being healed because that revenge she had hoped for had not come. Indeed, the sight of Duke's happiness, and Ethel's position in Eaglehurst, only irritated her the more. Though silent, and keeping her sentiments skillfully under control, she none the less brooded over what she held as her wrong.

As to Duke's happiness, he himself was the one who had least doubt upon the point. Morning and night he was grateful for it, especially when a nursery had to be prepared for his infant son and heir. When he watched his pretty, graceful wife moving about him, with a bright light ever in her eyes, and a smile on her lip, he acknowledged that no man had more cause to be thankful than he.

In fact, his life had been all sunshine, and less favored couples knew scarcely which to envy most, the Squire or his young wife.

It was about three o'clock of a slaty March afternoon, when Ethel, clad in a sealskin hat and warm furs, entered the study where Duke sat by a blazing fire enjoying a pile of newspapers and magazines which had just arrived.

Ethel was humming the refrain of a tune she had been singing to the wonderful baby, Master Marmaduke, in the nursery, as she came in fastening her glove.

"So you're really going, my dear?" asked Duke, looking round the broad sheets of the newspaper. "It's a disagreeable day—an east wind don't think."

"If people allowed their outgoings to be governed by the direction of the wind in this climate," laughed Ethel, "they'd stay at home all the winter. There are one or two purchases I have to make at Eaglehurst, and I really must call on poor old Mrs. Grew. I intend to send her for four days, and the poor old creature will think herself quite neglected. This notion you had of going to give me a lesson as a brave little woman, Ethel!"

"Remember her husband, fondly, but to give fifty pounds to a charity is, in my opinion, a far easier matter than to listen to all the pains and complaints of your pensioners."

"Nonsense!" laughed Ethel, gayly. "but you, as a man, my love, are not asked to do more than give the fifty pounds, and while we women distribute your bounty, sit at home and read your papers. Have you any news?"

She was standing behind him, her hand on

his chair, preparatory to kissing him before she went.

"Not much, at present. Oh, by the way, another convict has escaped—this time, though, from Dartmoor. Singular, but those fellows broke prison just about this time last year. No, I recollect it was the August of the year before."

As he spoke, Ethel's lips went as white as her cheeks, her hands gripped tightly the chair-back on which she leaned. A dizziness for a few seconds seized her.

"The fellow here made a hard fight for it," proceeded Duke. "But they captured him at last after peppering his jacket with shot. Upon my word, we can't help, in a measure, pitying the poor men. It's so natural to strive for freedom. This case, however, is not half so interesting as the other, which was quite a sensational plot in itself."

How glibly—how carelessly he talked! How ignorant of the pale face and trembling figure of the young wife behind him!

Nervous, lest her silence should attract attention, Ethel forced herself to speak.

"In that other case one was killed; but the other was never captured?"

"No; never, that I have heard," laughed Duke, lightly. "If ever there was a cool, determined rascal, he was the man!"

"Good-by, dear," broke in Ethel, kissing his forehead. "I must begone, or it will be dusk before I return. I shall not be more than an hour."

"How cold your lips are, Ethel!" exclaimed her husband. "I wish you wouldn't go this afternoon."

"Nonsense, Duke!" And she gave a nervous laugh. "If I am cold, a brisk walk will make me warm."

Crossing to the window, opening one of the glass doors, she passed out, nodded cheerfully back at him, then at a quick pace, walked toward the lodge gates.

Duke, rising from his chair, slowly advanced to the window, and watched her moving with so quick and elastic a step.

"I have half a mind to accompany her!" he pondered. "She's a brave, noble little soul! Only, 'pon my word, in these pensioner visits I feel far more in the way than of any use. Let me see!" consulting his watch: "she said she would be about an hour. Perhaps I'll go and meet her."

Making this compromise, he returned to his easy-chair and heap of papers.

Meanwhile Ethel, exhilarated by the brisk walk through the cold March air, had thrown off the fear which any mention of that escape from Portland always occasioned.

Clarissa Harfield was right in her surmise that her cousin's wife had a secret; but it was a secret untold—a secret which, now that that convict was dead, need never be told, and never could be discovered. No; there was small chance of that. When she died, the secret would perish with her.

Ethel made her small purchases first, then visited Mrs. Grew, where the garrulity of the bedridden old woman, which the visitor in her good-nature could not check, though she had heard the same complaint twenty times at least already, delayed her longer than she had expected.

When she quitted the cottage, the first shades of twilight were falling about the trees. Ethel considered. There were two ways to the Hall—by the high road to the lodge gates, and by the fields to a side gate in the ring-fence. The latter was half a mile or more shorter than the former.

Ethel rarely went that way when alone; but now she wished to be at home quickly, so resolved to take it.

Scarcely, however, had she got half-way across the second meadow, boarded by high, straggling hedges, than she began to regret having taking the solitary path, for she heard the quick step of a man behind her.

A flutter rose in Ethel's heart, and she reflected how angry Duke would be. Then she

encouraged herself by remembering that, save during harvest time, tramps and footpads were rarely known at Eaglehurst, and ventured to take a furtive glance over her shoulder.

The man coming along the path was tall and slight, and though shabbily attired, was evidently no footpad. A soft tourist hat was pulled over his brows, and the collar of his thin coat was turned up as protection against the nipping wind.

He walked with a quick, sharp step, and with his head bent, as if to escape the bleak air. Of Ethel's presence he seemed totally unconscious.

Encouraged, instead of hastening her pace, she slackened it. She recollected that there was a stile to cross, leading into a narrow lane, and preferred that the man should take the lead.

Her change of pace was, apparently, not noticed or not heeded by the other, who in a few minutes passed her swiftly, sprung over the stile, and disappeared.

Ethel lingered a few moments to permit him to get well in advance before she followed. No sooner, however, had she entered the lane than she started back with a wild, terrified cry.

The man had not gone on. He was there by the hedge, evidently waiting for her; but he no longer looked the same who had passed a moment ago. The hat was raised from the handsome but keen face, the collar laid down, the coat thrown open.

It had been years since they had met, but now the recognition was instantaneous.

"Edward! Great Heaven!" ejaculated Ethel, with a frightened cry. Then, "Oh, it cannot be—it is impossible! Living!"

"Not impossible, for it is true," replied the man, with a short laugh, taking a step forward.

As he did so, pale from a great dread, Ethel retreated. She need not have feared. The other, merely raising himself to the top of the stile, sat there confronting her.

"Why should I not be alive," he proceeded, "though you evidently thought me dead?"

By an effort steadying her voice, trying to realize her position, Ethel answered, "I did. How could I think otherwise?"

"And wished it?" he laughed.

"What reason had I for not desiring it?" she retorted. "What but misery have you ever brought to me and mine? What," she added, suddenly wringing her hands, "but relief could I feel while believing you dead?—what but despair to see you here alive, again to persecute—disgrace me? Why are you here," she continued, "when they said you died on the Portland rocks? Oh, Heaven!" she almost shrieked, as the remembrance recurred to her; "how dared they deceive me?—how dared they say what was not true?"

"What, then," he remarked, with a half-sneer, "you had not so entirely buried yourself but that that report reached your ears?"

"I read it," she answered, keeping down her emotion, which from experience she knew, unless he had much changed, would have little effect on her companion. "I saw in a newspaper, a year ago last August, how two convicts had escaped from Portland; how one had evaded pursuit; how the other, Edward Vaughan, had been found dead among the rocks upon which he must have fallen."

"Exactly. But did you not read that other paragraph, my dear Ethel, which appeared in the Saturday papers?"

"What paragraph?" she demanded, a deadly faintness coming over her as she recollected that that was the day on which she had promised to become Duke Sterndale's wife.

"That which stated that there had been an error in regard to the convict who was killed. On taking the dead man back to Portland, and washing his bruised, lacerated face, it was found by a peculiar mark on the left temple, that he was not Edward Vaughan, but Gerald Ainsley. In fact, that Edward Vaughan must have been with the poor fellow at the time of the accident, and, ascertaining him to be dead,



had changed clothes—that is, cap and jacket—the better to destroy his own identity.”

“And—and—this was true?—you did this?”

“I did, with success. You see, I am here.”

“And I,” moaned Ethel, beneath her breath, “never saw it! Ah! why did I ever see the other?—why did I ever believe this man dead, and bring sorrow and disgrace on Duke—on my boy?”

She was leaning against the hedge, head drooped and hands clasped. Could she have died at that moment she would have rejoiced. Yet no; she must live to keep her secret still—to avert misery, if possible, and at any sacrifice, from those so dear to her.

Suddenly she became conscious of the rapidly falling twilight, and thought of Duke's anxiety at her protracted absence. Suppose he should seek her? The idea roused her into action. By any means she must get rid of her companion—also must discover the purpose which had made him seek her out. That, however, she believed she could guess only too easily.

“So,” she said, looking up, “though at large, Edward, you are a hunted man, flying, hiding from justice?”

“No less; with the honor of having fifty pounds placed as a reward upon my head,” he replied, lightly.

“What a life!” she shuddered.

“It is not pleasant,” he laughed; “but preferable, I assure you, to toiling in the Portland quarries.”

“Why have you sought me?” she went on. “How did you find me?”

“By the merest chance,” he replied. “Naturally following the instincts of affection”—she made an impatient movement of her hand—“directly I could with safety after my escape, I strove to discover you, but without success. Three weeks ago, however, I determined, my exchequer being on the verge of bankruptcy, to make my way to Liverpool. I had reached as far as this, half tramping it and getting a lift when I could, when, yesterday evening, as I entered Eaglehurst, footsore and weary, a handsome carriage passed me, in which you were seated, bright, comfortable, handsomely dressed by the side of a regular swell. Fancy, Ethel!”—and he laughed—“the dust of your carriage wheels fell over me, a tramp!”

“And whose fault is that?” she exclaimed. “What have I ever done, Edward Vaughan, to merit the ill-fortune that has pursued me? What have you done to deserve a better fate? No, you have yourself to thank that your fortune was not a brilliant one. You are here—you have found me,” she proceeded, more rapidly, her tones growing passionate in her fear, her pleading. “Edward, surely I have suffered enough; you will not again destroy my happiness? You will not bring misery, disgrace on those I love—those who have proved to me that there is still goodness on earth? The tie that binds us cannot be broken; but how would its being made public benefit you? I know you are bad, unprincipled, but will not believe you so bad as to harm one who never harmed you. Edward, if pity ever entered your heart, let it do so now for me!”

She had small hope of moving him; but, carried away by her remembrance of Duke and her child, Ethel, sinking on her knees, extended her hands prayerfully toward him.

Descending from the stile, he took her hands between his, and answered, “Rise, Ethel; I do not doubt we shall easily come to an understanding. To make public who I am, and who you are, would certainly not benefit me. No; far from plucking you down from your high estate, you can better serve me by remaining in it. Last night, at the small inn yonder”—and he jerked his handsome head toward the town—“I learned your history. How you came here, a kind of parish school-teacher, and finally married the young Squire Sterndale, who showed his taste by admiring your goodness and beauty. Yes, Ethel, I am a villain; but I know goodness when I see it, and you

are good. I will not harm you further than I can help,” he added, “if you will aid me, for I want assistance, confoundedly. A man in hiding finds it difficult to get even bread and cheese enough to keep life together.”

“What aid do you want?” she asked, faintly.

His words had surprised her; but how could she put trust in them? The position of a straw was not more easily changed by the wind than this man, the essence of selfishness, by circumstances.

“Money,” he answered, laconically.

“I thought so.”

“Yes; the want with me is chronic,” he laughed. “The need of it has led me to be what I am. But you will not rail against the purpose for which I now require it,” he went on. “I wish to get away to America. There, out West, San Francisco direction, I may make a living; here, leading the existence of a hunted dog, I never can.”

He was right. The idea of his leaving England made her heart beat with a sudden joy. There was feasibility, too, in this desire. There might be hope for him in America; there was not any here.

“How much will you require?” she asked, so readily that he smiled. “But,” she added, “understand me, for I speak truth. You must be reasonable in your demand, for I have control over little money, and will lay myself open to no suspicion of my husband’s.”

“There, I’ll take care of that!” he laughed.

“I will not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, my dear Ethel! And from your riches, who knows but you may find it a charitable deed now and again to inclose a bank-note to a poor fellow making his way in the world?”

She shuddered. Did he mean this as a threat? That these demands would be frequently made a ceaseless trouble in her life? She replied, firmly, “Keep the secret that binds us yet a secret, and as far as I can I will help you. How much do you require now? Be speedy, for I cannot delay longer. Gracious!” and in terror she glanced round. “How dark it has grown!”

“Yes; too late, I suppose, for you, the Squire’s young wife, to be abroad, for fear of footpads and other bad characters,” he remarked, jestingly. “There, I will no longer detain you. I do not wish to be other than friends. For my passage, outfit, and a little money to start with after I cross the great continent, I cannot say less than a hundred and fifty.”

“A hundred and fifty!” she gasped. “I can never do it!”

“You must try, Ethel. Why, the price of that brooch and those earrings you wear would go far toward the sum.”

“I fear I cannot do it,” she rejoined. “If I could, I would. Listen, Edward!” she proceeded hurriedly, growing more and more terrified at the increasing darkness. How should she account for her long absence to Duke? “What I can do, I swear I will! Tomorrow I can let you know what that will be. But how communicate with you?”

“Not by letter,” he put in, hastily. “Remember, while in England I am always in hiding. I must be cautious; treble so since I have a chance of quitting England, and giving my pursuers the slip. Any communication between us, Ethel, must be verbal. Where can I meet you?”

“Meet me? Impossible!”

“No; reflect. Surely there must be some place where you might do so in safety? Ah, I have it!” he added, after a brief reflection. “You, of course, know the old ruined mill on the moor. It cannot be half a mile from your place; that is, beyond the grounds. No spot could be safer. I passed the day there yesterday, not caring to enter Eaglehurst until evening, when I could reconnoiter it and its police better. Say the mill after dusk.”

Ethel reflected. It did appear the safest spot; for, as her companion had said, it was but a few minutes’ walk from the Sterndale grounds.

“Let it be there,” she said. “At eight, tomorrow evening, you shall then know what I can do for you. Now I can stay no longer.”

“Thanks, and good-night!” he said. Then, as she passed to proceed on her way, he held out his hand. “What!” he added, as she recoiled quickly; “you will not take it?”

“No!” she answered, firmly. “And you know why. Never, Edward Vaughan, shall my hand be willingly placed in yours!”

“Oh, very well; as you please. Don’t think I intend to force you to it,” he remarked, carelessly, shrugging his shoulder. Then, abruptly striding toward her, leaning his face, convulsed with sudden angry suspicion, forward, he exclaimed, “Listen to me, Ethel. You hate me; you have owned that the belief of my death brought no regret. Have you now any plan to give me up—to have done with me? Remember, fifty pounds is placed on my head. A secret word from you, and fifty people would be only too delighted to capture me.”

Haughtily, scornfully she turned her glance upon him.

“Are you mad, Edward Vaughan?” she remarked, coldly. “How would your arrest benefit me? You know I dare not betray you! Do you forget who you are—what we are to each other?”

Then, without another word, she hastened down the lane.

When she had gone, and the man, re-crossing the stile, had returned toward Eaglehurst, a woman moved away from the other side of the hedge inclosing the meadow opposite that by which Ethel had come. It was Clarissa Harfield. Misfortune had brought her to the spot, and she had overheard nearly the entire interview. A smile of triumph was on her features as, crossing the meadow swiftly at an angle, she returned to the Dower House.

“I knew I was right—that there was a dark spot in Ethel Vaughan’s life,” she murmured. “I have her secret at last, and the cards are in my hands, though I must be cautious how I play them. What did she say?—‘Do you forget what we are to each other?’ I wonder what is the tie that connects her, and makes her subservient to the convict Edward Vaughan’s will? ‘Tie!’ she repeated, with a sneering laugh; “surely there can be but one!”

Meanwhile Ethel hurried home. Her brain was in a whirl, so suddenly had it all happened—the reappearance of this man, whom she had believed dead—that it seemed like a dream. But she had only to look around her, at the darkness that was descending over the land, to feel how real it was.

How should she account for her long absence to Duke? She was breathless as she entered the hall, bright with light.

“Where is your master?” she asked of the footman.

“In the study, ma’am. He was coming, I think, to meet you, ma’am when the rector called.”

“Thank Heaven!” reflected Ethel, as she crossed to the drawing-room.

Ring for the maid, she removed her hat and mantle; then drew a chair to the fire, to which she spread her hands, shivering as with cold. How bright and happy had been her life a few hours ago! And now it looked as drear and melancholy as the black March night without.

In about five minutes she heard her husband’s voice and the rector’s. Then the hall-door closed, and Duke, a second after, entered.

“Oh, you are back, Ethel!” he said, advancing toward the fire. “Whatever made you so late, my love? When twilight set in I was coming to meet you, only the rector delayed me.”

“I’m glad, dear,” she replied, with a forced smile, “you had not the trouble. I can never get away from that old Mrs. Grew, and the night is so bleak.”

“Bleak!” he repeated, looking down at her.



"Why, Ethie, you are as white as a ghost, and look as chilled as your hands feel," he added, with concern. "I told you, my love, you ought not to go out in this east wind. You have caught a cold."

"I think I have a little," she answered, glad to seize the excuse he offered. "But it is nothing; a day or two's imprisonment in the house will cure it. At the worst, Duke, it will only necessitate your dining at the Dower House to-morrow evening without me."

"You certainly shall not go out again in this east wind until you look better," he said, as, stooping, he kissed her, attributing the shiver she gave when his lips touched her forehead to cold.

"Oh," moaned Ethel, mentally, "if he only knew! How will it all end? Will Edward be true, and my secret safe?"

#### CHAPTER V.

##### THE RUINED MILL.

LITTLE sleep visited Ethel's eyes that night, and in the morning she had no need to assume indisposition that Duke might proceed alone to the Dower House, leaving her free. On the contrary, she had to try to make him believe her less ill than she really was. Her cheeks were colorless, her eyes haggard.

Her mental suffering through the long night-watches had not been entirely occasioned by the idea of obtaining the money Edward Vaughan required, nor by any doubt that the latter would not use the sum as he had explained. His safety depended on his quitting England. It was terror lest by any unforeseen circumstance Duke should discover her secret. Little did she dream that it was already in the possession of an enemy who would be pitiless in her use of it.

How that day went to Ethel she never distinctly knew. Her brain felt dazed, while her sensitiveness to any sound was painfully acute. For the first time, Duke's presence irritated her, and she could find no relief in the society of her boy. It was easy for her to attribute her depression to her cold, and the dull, wintry aspect of the day. It formed an excuse for her to sit silently by the fire during the long afternoon.

How long it seemed to her! Would the evening never come?—and the morrow? Ah, then she might breathe again, for Edward Vaughan would be far away.

Lest Duke should carry out a half-expressed suggestion that he would send an excuse to his step-mother, and not leave her alone, Ethel roused herself as evening drew on, appearing even animated and lively.

"My dear Duke," she laughed, "you really must go. The idea! I should never hear the last of it from your cousin Clarissa, who, between ourselves, does not, I fancy, favor me with very warm friendship. They would say you spoiled me, and I was willing to be spoiled. Were I really ill, dear, don't think I would send you away. But I am so much better since this morning that I might almost accompany you."

They stood together on the long, white, silky hearth-rug, before the fire, and while she spoke she lifted her face toward him. As the evening had drawn on, a nervous excitement had taken possession of her. Her eyes were brilliant, her cheek flushed.

"Accompany me?" exclaimed Duke, as he put his arm round her waist. "Not if I know it, little wife. Yes, you are better; but I fear, love, it is the excitement of your feverish cold. If you are not quite well to-morrow, I certainly shall call in Doctor Danvers."

"Ah," laughed Ethel, "we'll wait for to-morrow, then. Now, Duke, you really must start, or you will keep Mrs. Sterndale's dinner waiting, and that always makes her angry, you know. Harrison announced the carriage five minutes back."

"Well, good-by, love. Mind you go to bed early."

"Be assured I'll take care of myself. You will not know me to-morrow," proceeded Ethel,

not aware that her words might have been taken for a prophecy. "Stay; how carelessly you have made the bow of your tie. Let me arrange it."

He came back to her, and, with trembling fingers, she retied the small white strip of cambric.

Why did she so linger over it? Why was she so loth to let him depart? Was she conscious of that reluctance unknown to herself? Was she already under the influence of the dark cloud so soon to overshadow her?

Finally, however, the tie was arranged. With another kiss he left her. She remained standing until she heard the door close, and the wheels of the carriage die away down the avenue. Then she dropped into her chair, covered her face with her hands, and burst into a fit of hysterical weeping. Surely, indeed, the cloud was descending upon her spirit.

So she remained until past seven, when she ascended to her room. As she came out again, she heard her baby's voice. He was crying fretfully. Crossing the corridor, she opened the door of the nursery, which Duke had made quite luxurious for his son and heir.

"What is the matter with Master Marmaduke?" she inquired of the nurse, a pleasant-featured woman, who was pacing the room with the child in her arms, jerking her body backward and forward in time to a nursery ditty.

"I don't know, ma'am. He seems a bit feverish, and won't go to sleep—that he won't."

Ethel, taking the infant, sat down on a low chair, and rocked it, gently humming a song. The child nestled closer to her bosom, and the large blue eyes, fixed on her face, gradually closed. In ten minutes he was asleep.

"I can't tell how it is, ma'am, he always goes to sleep with you," smiled the nurse, as Ethel, after kissing the little pink cheeks, placed the baby in its cot—a gem of blue silk and lace. "Are you better yourself, ma'am?"

"Yes, thank you, Jenkins. I shall be quite well to-morrow. I am going to my own room now. Please see that I am not disturbed."

But, instead, Ethel glided quickly downstairs to the drawing-room. Here she had already brought her dark ulster, and a hat with a veil. Putting them on, she quitted the house by the drawing-room window, closing the glass door behind her. In her pocketbook were notes for a hundred pounds. It was all she had at the time, and that by chance, as she had happened a few days before to draw that amount from her banker's out of the handsome allowance Duke made her.

The night was as dark as that previous one, only now the wind, having veered to north-east, moaned and rustled among the leafless trees as Ethel sped beneath them. The sky was mottled by dark, stormy clouds, that flew swiftly over the heavens.

The path she traversed led through the wooded portion of the grounds. It was a dreary, wild spot at that hour; but Ethel had no fear—her mind was too engrossed by her errand. In an hour she would be coming back, all dread removed.

Reaching the gate in the ring fence, and lifting the latch, she passed through.

The moor was now all around her, save to the south, where lay Sterndale, which she was leaving.

In front, she knew, was the place of meeting, and proceeded onward over the uneven ground. In a few minutes the ruined mill rose up at a little distance before her, a bulk in the darkness. It had a weird aspect, for behind it in the horizon were some dashes of white cloud, where the moon was rising, the light of which shone through the bars of the gaunt sails, about which the canvas hung in tatters.

A little nearer, Ethel beheld, in one of the small lower windows, the red reflection of a fire.

"What madness!" she thought. "He, too, who spoke of precaution!"

Perhaps he had done it as a beacon-light to her over the dark moor. Even then it was

unwise. It was not likely any one would pass at that hour. Yet supposing they should?

Ethel hastened on, and soon stood at the foot of the small flight of wooden stairs leading to the door. Her light step had been heard by Edward Vaughan, who was waiting. The door was instantly opened by him, letting out a red glow upon his visitor.

That day Clarissa Harfield had been scarcely less anxious than Ethel herself. Through the night she had lain awake thinking and planning. Her time truly had arrived—she felt it, knew it—but the blow intended for her rival she desired to appear not to come entirely from her hand.

Before morning dawned, she had decided. Rising an hour later, she carefully penned a letter, unsigned—with knaves, as cowards, it is usual to stab anonymously. Then, before the household was astir, she quitted the Dower House, proceeded across the fields to Eaglehurst, and posted her communication while slumber yet held the little town in silence.

If the day was long to Ethel, it was longer to Clarissa, who was of a more excitable, impatient nature. In the morning she acquainted Mrs. Sterndale with a portion of what she knew.

"What!" ejaculated the lady, dropping her work on her knees. "My dear Clarissa, think of what you are saying! Ethel, my son's wife, meet a man clandestinely?"

"My dear aunt," replied her niece gravely, "for your sake, for Duke's—though he cannot say he was not warned—I wish I could recall my words. But I cannot. Yesterday evening, when I went over the fields to Eaglehurst, I came upon Ethel and a man talking together, and familiarly, as old acquaintances, in Blue Bell Lane."

"Good gracious! And the man—who was he?"

"That I cannot tell. To me he was a stranger, as I suspect he is to Eaglehurst."

"Do you—do you," asked Mrs. Sterndale, who liked Ethel more than she had dared confess to her niece—"think, Clarissa, that he was a former lover?"

The niece shook her head.

"No, aunt; from the words I heard there is a stronger tie binding them. His appearance was evidently no pleasure to Ethel. She seemed terrified lest any one should see her. Whoever he is, aunt, he has a power over her she cannot resist; for I heard him demand a hundred and fifty pounds to enable him to escape to America."

"Good heavens! My poor Duke!" gasped Mrs. Sterndale. "Oh, this is dreadful, Clarissa! Suppose this man is some bad character?—some relation of Ethel's? Imagine the disgrace to our name!"

Clarissa slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"Did I not warn Duke? Did I not say there was a mystery about that Ethel Vaughan?—that she had a secret which could scarcely be to her honor, else she would hardly have held it untold to her husband?"

"That is true. Yes, Clarissa; you were right," whimpered Mrs. Sterndale. "Dear, dear, what a wretched, miserable thing it is that people should have such troubles forced upon them! 'Rissa, I suppose Duke must be informed of this?"

"You, my dear aunt, must surely be the best judge of that."

"Of course he must be told," remarked the lady, petulantly. "It wouldn't do to let things go quietly, so that greater disgrace should come of it. Just imagine if Ethel were this man's wife, and, believing him dead when he wasn't, had married my poor Duke!"

"Such things have been, aunt. Who he really is Duke must ascertain."

"But who is to tell him?"

"Who better, aunt," responded the niece, "than his own mother? He will listen to the story best from your lips, knowing you love Ethel, and that Sterndale honor is as dear to you as to him."

"Do you mean that I should drive over to



the Hall? I couldn't 'Rissa! My nerves wouldn't let me!"

"There is no occasion. Are they not coming here this evening?—or, rather, Duke; for I suspect Ethel will find an excuse to stay away."

"But there is another difficulty," put in the elder lady. "Duke adores his wife; he will never believe anything against her."

"That, aunt, must rest with him," replied Clarissa. "If you mean he will doubt my word, he will have an opportunity of himself proving its truth. Why I said Ethel would find some cause for not dining here is because she has made an appointment with the man this evening at eight at the ruined mill on the moor to take him the money he needs!"

"What, Clarissa!—a hundred and fifty pounds—and of poor Duke's money? Why, if he is not told, she will ruin him! Besides, if there really be something wrong, it is only proper that Duke should be able to judge with his own eyes."

Clarissa and her aunt talked long over this threatened disgrace to Sterndale, and by the former's suggestion it was arranged that Duke should not be told until after dinner; for, being of an impetuous disposition, he might hurry back to the Hall, and thus destroy all proof by putting his wife on her guard.

When the young husband, arriving at about the same moment as the announcement of dinner, entered alone, apologizing for Ethel's absence, a quick, meaning glance passed between the two ladies. Duke, however, having at the instant to give his arm to Mrs. Sterndale, failed to notice it, or the rather cold fashion with which the news of his wife's indisposition was received.

At dinner he certainly thought his mother and cousin, though more than ordinarily kind, less pleasant company than usual; consequently, though alone, sat rather longer over his wine.

"Now," he remarked, as finally he crossed to the drawing room, "I'll take a cup of coffee, and go back to Ethel. It's a shame to leave her by herself. Where is 'Rissa, mother?" he asked, when, on entering, he found only Mrs. Sterndale there.

"She will be here directly, my dear Duke. But I want a few words in private with you. Come"—moving her skirt—"and sit by me."

"Why, what is wrong?" answered her stepson. "I fancied something was from your and 'Rissa's manner. Has the cook again given warning, or the gardener spoiled your favorite orchids?"

"Don't jest, dear Duke," said Mrs. Sterndale, gravely but kindly, as she placed her hand on his. "This is, indeed, most serious—that is, I fear so!"

"What do you mean?"

"Now, you mustn't be angry with me, Duke, for it isn't my fault. How could it be?" she proceeded, dropping into her nervous, whimpering manner. "Heaven knows if I could make it different I would!"

"What would you make different? Speak; you are driving me mad!"

"But I can't Duke, while you look like that! You frighten me! If you'll sit down—"

Duke threw himself into the chair, and then was told all.

What his feelings were we cannot describe. He would not believe the tale—would not mistrust Ethel—so pure, so fond, so good!

"It is not true!" he cried, springing up again. "It is false! Ethel shall come here herself, if she can without lessening her dignity, and tell you it is false!"

"Thank you! It is the first time that I have had my word doubted! In future I will not trouble myself with the honor of others when my reward is insults!"

It was Clarissa who had spoken. She had entered unperceived. Her tones were cold and haughty; the glance that met Duke's full of scorn.

Slightly abashed, he answered, "I did not mean to insult you, Clarissa! But how can I believe this of my wife?"

"Your wife, Duke, whose antecedents you never knew—remember that!" said his cousin, calmly. "What interest would it be to me to concoct such a story, which, if false, could soon be proved so? On the contrary, you have the means of verifying my words. Ethel Sterndale has not dined here to-day because she meets him I saw with her, at eight to-night; at the ruined mill, to hand him a sum of money to enable him to quit England, and to pay him for keeping her secret!"

"By Heaven!" cried the wretched husband, "I will test your words! I will unravel this cruel doubt!"

"And I will go with you!" said Clarissa. "I have a right, since you have refused to believe my words."

"Do so!" he retorted, as he hastened into the hall for his hat. "Innocent or guilty, I care not if all the world know it! But guilty—no; I do Ethel wrong for a second to entertain the thought!"

Shortly after, the two were making their way to the ruined mill.

They had proceeded more than half-way when a distant church clock struck eight.

On that same day there had reached the chief constable of Eaglehurst an anonymous, ill-spelt, ill-written communication, which ran thus:—

"Edwud Varn, the convick which escaped from Portland las argust twelmonth is now in eaglehurs in idin afor he gets off to Liverpool. Ternight at a quarter pas ate he'll be at the ruined mill on the more, if you like to take him. Don't come afore that time. Fifty pounds is offered to them as captures him."

The chief constable turned the missive this way and that curiously, and examined the postmark.

"Now," he reflected, "is this a hoax, or the result of a falling-out between thieves? It's true Edward Vaughan did escape from Portland last August twelvemonth, and it's certain Eaglehurst lies in the road to Liverpool, if the chap's bound for America, though I should 'a' fancied he'd got clean off there long ago. Still, fifty pounds is fifty pounds, and I don't see why it shouldn't be in my pocket if I can get it. Besides, if it's a hoax or if it ain't, it's my duty to take notice of the communication."

So that evening Chief Constable Follett and two of his men, at about a quarter to eight, started, with every precaution to avoid observation, for the ruined mill.

## CHAPTER VI.

### WHAT HAPPENED THERE.

ETHEL quickly ascending the steps, entered the mill, when the man closed the door. The room seemed of that description which formerly had served as a kitchen and general sitting-room for the miller's family and men. The plaster of the walls was stained and dilapidated; portions, fallen from the ceiling, leaving the rafters exposed.

On one side was a flight of wooden stairs leading through an opening to a room above; opposite to the stairs was a deep, high chimney-place, with settles at each side, and where at the present moment burned a small bright wood fire.

"What made you light that?" asked Ethel, pointing impatiently at the hearth. "Do you court detection?"

As she spoke, she crossed to the window to close the shutters.

"It's no use, my dear," smiled Edward Vaughan. "The shutters have long been gone. Served, I suspect, as fuel for some poor beggar!"

"The more unwise to have kindled the fire," responded Ethel. "Could you not have borne the cold a little while, rather than risk your safety?"

"It's all very well for those who are warm to talk of supporting cold," he retorted, with a sneer, glancing at his thin, worn garments, then at her thick, seasonable clothing. "But there," he added, quickly, in a changed tone—"there's no fear, Ethel. I fancy many a tramp has found shelter and warmth here ere this, for there were the ashes of a fire when I came.

And I don't want to be rough or cross, for it's kind of you to keep your word. Have you brought the money?"

"Not all!" she answered, drawing near the fire, and so standing as to permit its reflection falling as little as possible on the window. "I told you I feared I could not. I have brought a hundred."

The man's brows contracted darkly.

"Only a hundred!" he remarked. "That's awfully little to carry a fellow to San Francisco. I don't think I can do it."

"Don't threaten me, Edward!" she answered, meeting his glance calmly. "I told you I would do for you what I could. I can give you the hundred pounds now, and it is only by a fortunate chance I am able to do that. But leave me the name of some place where I can send to you, and you shall have the fifty."

Edward Vaughan was leaning against the opposite side of the fire, which flashed up its bright light between them. His arms were folded, and his dark, handsome eyes were bent on the graceful, still rather girlish-looking figure before him, with an expression of almost pity.

"That's very kind of you, Ethel," he said. "There is only one person in the world whose word I would trust, and you are that person. I don't believe you ever told a falsehood in your life."

"Then you are wrong," she answered, in a low tone. "Since last evening I have been compelled to tell many—for your sake."

"And possibly," he put in, "for *his* sake, too, Ethel. Well, they were, I suspect, very harmless ones, easily forgiven."

She did not immediately reply. Taking out her pocket-book, she drew from it some folded notes, and passed them to him.

"There are the hundred pounds," she said. "Count them."

"No." And he crushed them into his pocket. "Didn't I say I trusted you, Ethel?"

"You may. I should not deceive you. Now farewell; I need remain no longer."

She moved toward the door, but he checked her.

"Don't you feel curious at all about my future, Ethel?" he said. "Are we thus to part? Remember, we may never—I don't think we shall ever meet again!"

"Will it not be better? Have I not paid that it should be so?" she retorted.

"Who would have thought, Ethel," he said, with a half smile, "that once we were very fond of each other? That I'd have gone through fire and water for you, and you held me as a hero—your idol!"

"An idol you were not long in shattering, Edward," she answered, sadly. "The love that once was between us died years ago!"

Without the worm-eaten door stood Duke Sterndale, hearing, seeing all. There was a storm of passion in his breast that overcame his suffering. His lips were compressed, his face pale, his eyes gleamed with anger. By his side was his cousin, Clarissa Harfield.

Twenty yards distant, three men were at the same time advancing through the darkness to the mill.

Ignorant of the peril closing round her, Ethel, feeling some pity for her companion, stepped back.

"Edward," she said, "give me ground for feeling interest once again in you. Let the future make some amends for the past."

"Ethel, I intend, 'pon my word, to try," he replied. "It's a difficult thing to be honest. Yet I shall soon begin a new life in a new land."

"I shall be glad to learn that you have succeeded. But, for the sake of others, remember your promise that you will never come here again. Now give me the address to which I am to write, and let me go."

He was about to comply, when a sound without made him spring quickly back. The startled, desperate expression, habitual to the hunted, came on his features.

Ethel also had heard, but hardly had she



turned than the door was flung wide, and, to her horror, Duke Sterndale strode in. With a cry she recoiled, then took one step forward, with arms extended.

"Duke, have mercy!" she ejaculated, in broken accents. "Hear me!"

"Hear you!" he cried. "Yes, speak the truth. Who is this man? Answer, and not falsely, or, by Heaven, Ethel, you and I are strangers from this hour!"

"Oh, Heaven, have pity!" moaned Ethel, staggering forward. "I have wronged you, Duke, but pardon; that man is my—my—"

"Husband!" broke in the clear, ringing tones of Clarissa Harfield.

Whether Ethel heard or not, she had no opportunity of proving, for she dropped insensible at Duke's feet.

"And," concluded the rougher voice of Chief Constable Follett, running up the steps, "Edward Vaughan, the escaped convict. Now, lads, there's your prisoner; seize him!"

But the capture was not to be so easily effected. Edward Vaughan, a hard, defiant expression on his countenance, had, as the officers rushed in, thrown one rapid glance round in search of a means to escape.

There was but one—the stairs. In a moment he had gained them, and had sprung up, disappearing through the opening. He stopped to close the trap after him, and to feel for the fastening. There was none. Turning, he ran on—where, he knew not. Meanwhile his brain was busy. Who could have discovered him? Who put these men on his track? Could it have been Ethel? No; of that he was assured. It was as much to her interest as his own that he should escape.

As he went, his hands groping his way through the dark mill, he heard the officers slowly following. Then it struck him how useless was his flight.

Like the thief who rushes into a lane with no thoroughfare, when he got to the top of the mill he could go no further. Then he must be taken.

Suddenly he stumbled.

Here was another stair, narrower than the others.

He must either go up it, or wait to be taken.

Never! With Portland before him, he would make a desperate fight for liberty.

He went on, and panting, reached the top. Here a moment, breathless, he paused.

All was darkness.

He heard the police searching the rooms he had passed. They were so sure of him they could take their time.

Fiercely Edward Vaughan looked round. Had he reached the top of the mill? Could he go no further? Was he to be taken like a rat in a trap?

As he turned, he became conscious of a stream of cold air blowing on his face.

He hastened in the direction, and found a window, or rather the opening where the window had been.

He started with a cry of joy; for against the sky—now of a pale, leaden gray—he beheld the bars of the lowest sail of the windmill. Stepping nearer, he looked through the opening.

The sail was within a few feet of him. Could he, had he the courage to risk the spring?

The reward would be liberty; the failure, injury, death, perhaps. If he remained, he must bid farewell to freedom forever, and better death than life without that.

The policemen's tread was already on the stair. He saw the gleam of their lanterns in the room.

He decided.

Drawing a little back for impetus, he made the spring.

Had he failed? No. His fingers clutched firmly the bars. Rapidly he planted his feet, to relieve the weight of his hands, then swiftly descended.

On reaching the last bar, he found the sail

far higher from the ground than he had imagined. But having done so much, he was not to be daunted by this.

Hanging by his fingers, he swung himself there awhile, then dropped.

He fell on his hands and knees, for a second much dazed and shaken, but not otherwise hurt.

The imminence of his peril caused him to rise quickly to his feet. A moment he paused to glance at the mill. All was dark. Only a faint gleam shone from the upper window through which he had come.

The police were still searching, then. They had not guessed yet how he had managed to elude them.

With the most rapid speed he could command, he made his way across the moor.

Meanwhile, another scene was taking place in the mill-kitchen. When Ethel, with a moaning cry, had sunk to the floor, Duke had half sprung forward to her side; but his cousin's words arrested him.

"Her husband?" he ejaculated, turning quickly, heedless of the fugitive and his pursuers. "How, Clarissa, can you know that?"

"From inference, Duke," she answered, sadly, as advancing, kneeling by her rival, she gently raised Ethel's head, loosening the hat and the ulster about the throat. "Duke," she proceeded, "this is terrible for you. But do not again willfully blind yourself. Remember the past; recall facts. This man and Ethel bear the same name; are both young. You heard his words—how once love existed between them. Recollect, too, that it appears this man is Edward Vaughan, the escaped convict, and Ethel refused to be your wife until after that paragraph falsely reporting the convict Edward Vaughan's death. Then, before the week was over, she had said, 'Yes.'"

"Oh!" groaned Duke Sterndale. "Clarissa, before I would not, now I must believe you. Aid me; help me! What can I do? What shall I do with this unhappy girl?"

With passionate sorrow he looked down upon the pale, deathlike features of Ethel.

"Leave her, Duke, to me," rejoined his cousin. "You are in no condition to speak to her now. Neither will she be fit for such an ordeal. Return to the Dower House; send the carriage here, and I will take Ethel to the Hall. To keep this from becoming public is now impossible."

"Too true!" rejoined Duke, in a low, agitated tone. "Before to-morrow all Eaglehurst will ring with the name of Sterndale."

"The disgrace is of no Sterndale's doing. Let that be a consolation, Duke. Now go; for Ethel shows no sign of returning consciousness, and I have no restoratives here."

The young man moved to the door, when his cousin's soft voice recalled him.

"Duke," she said, plaintively, "I it was who unvailed this sorrow to you. Are you angry? Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive you! Clarissa, certainly you have played that which is generally a thankless part; but I know it was my honor, the honor of our family, which made you speak, and I thank you."

He extended his hand, and when she placed hers in it, raised it to his lips; then he hurried from the mill toward the Dower House, leaving Clarissa in the dilapidated kitchen, kneeling in the red glow of the fire, supporting the unhappy Ethel in her arms.

## CHAPTER VII.

### FRIENDLESS—HOMELESS.

WOULD she live? That was the question which was put nearly every hour, day and night, for a week at Sterndale, about which the wondering household went softly.

Even Marmaduke, her boy, was removed to a more distant room, lest his cry, reaching his parent, should turn the balance of life and death against her.

Ethel had never recovered consciousness after that fainting-fit. It had but given place to hysteria and delirium.

All the night Duke had paced the library, receiving each hour bulletins of Ethel's state from the doctor attending her.

Before dawn the latter's fears were confirmed. His patient had brain fever, and her life was in great danger.

Duke felt it impossible to quit the Hall while this was so, but kept to his own apartments. He never entered Ethel's room.

There were moments when the recollection of his love made him yearn to do so; but he restrained the desire.

The more he reflected upon the matter, the more he felt that his cousin Clarissa's surmise was true. Ethel was evidently Edward Vaughan's wife. No doubt taken by his handsome appearance, she had, when young, contracted a marriage with a villain. When her eyes had been opened by his arrest and condemnation, she had hidden from him, in the humble capacity of school-teacher at Eaglehurst.

Aware of the ties which bound her to Edward Vaughan, she had rejected Duke, though loving him, until she believed her wretched husband was dead.

In that she had willfully committed no sin. Her crime had been in not trusting him—in keeping her secret untold.

Would he have wedded her had she spoken?

How could he answer that question now? Edward Vaughan lived. Hence he, Duke, and Ethel must never meet again. None but himself knew how terrible was the thought. There were moments when he recalled those happy, joyous months of wedded life; the birth of his child—his child, of whom Ethel was the mother; and remembered how pretty she had looked nursing the infant, of whom both had been so proud, and the silent prayers of gratitude which he had breathed to Heaven for these, his two blessings, and then he feared that his brain would give way.

"No, no!" he cried, in agony; "I must never see her more—I dare not! I have neither the courage nor the strength!"

Once, however, he did. It was on the night when the doctor had said that whether Ethel would live or die would be decided before dawn. Then, the hired nurse only being in attendance in the sick-room—for Duke had refused both Clarissa and his step-mother's help, feeling that Ethel would prefer it—he entered, and noiselessly approached the bed.

The shaded lamp just permitted him to see the head, shorn of the golden wealth, resting motionless on the pillow, the delicate features so white, wan and thin. Would she live? Could she, when now she looked so like to death?

A terrible emotion seized him. He dropped on his knees by the bed, sobs bursting from his overcharged heart. He was aroused by the nurse, who, putting her hand on his shoulder, warned him that her patient's life depended on the strictest quiet.

"Would it not be better, perhaps, that she died, and felt no more of this cruel trouble?" he thought, bitterly.

He rose, pressed his lips to the small, thin hand on the coverlet, and withdrew.

"No; I must never see her again!" he moaned. "I have not the strength. For her sake, as for my own, we must not meet. Oh, my poor darling! How young, how delicate to bear this weight of trouble!"

When dawn broke, Ethel lay prostrate, a shadow of her former self; but the fever had subsided. She was conscious, and the doctor said she would live; only great care must yet be taken to keep all trouble and excitement from her.

Whether Ethel remembered as yet, in her weakened state, all the terrible occurrences of that night at the mill, Duke never knew. She lay so quiet, the nurse told him—quite docile to the slightest order, but rarely uttering a word.



Yet Ethel's brain was rapidly gaining power. If she did not speak, she thought, and frequently her hollow eyes would turn wistfully to the door when a step sounded in the corridor. Did she expect that Duke would come to her? If so, she bore his absence patiently.

"He blames me; but his blame cannot equal mine," she reflected. "I have brought disgrace upon his name—upon our child! I merit his scorn, his hate! Whatever my punishment, I shall hold it just; and, bowing my head, bear it. It is the only atonement I can make."

Days passed on, and Ethel gradually advanced toward convalescence. She strove to get strong, for she thought that then she would see Duke.

"Surely, then," she reflected; "for he will need some explanation. He keeps from me now, because he knows I am not strong enough to bear the interview."

She never asked to see him nor her boy. She bravely would do nothing that might retard her recovery.

Only once she had inquired where Mr. Sterndale was, and had been told that he was downstairs in the library.

As she grew stronger, she became nervous when she thought of the interview, for which she was, however, very anxious. She wished to know the worst. That Duke held her past forgiveness she had begun to fear by his never once coming near her.

She was anxious, too, upon another point. In recalling the scene at the mill, the last part was as but a vague dream. She knew she had spoken, but not what she had said.

Finally, the day dawned when, with the doctor's permission she might leave her room.

"Now the hour has come," she reflected. "I shall see Duke."

Her toilet took long arranging; her fingers trembled so. She wondered how much the household knew of what had happened, and what they thought. After all, what did it matter to her? What did any thing matter beyond Duke's opinion?

Nervously, at last, Ethel descended to the morning-room. It was one of the pleasantest in the house, and Duke generally passed the first hours of the morning there, reading the paper or his letters. Now he was absent.

For the first time, a fear seized Ethel—a suspicion of the truth. He would not see her. Recovering the momentary agitation the idea had caused her, she rung the bell.

"Where is Mr. Sterndale, Harrison?" she inquired of the footman, whose bearing she observed, with relief, was as respectful as usual.

"He went out, ma'am, immediately after breakfast. He left that letter, ma'am."

The footman indicated one on the mantle-piece, which Ethel had not seen.

"Thank you! You may go."

Then, when alone, with a sickness at the heart, she approached the mantlepiece.

Placing her hands on it, her head dropped forward on them; and, with a sob, she murmured, "He writes to me! He will not see me! I have disgraced him, and he will not hear my explanation! Oh, Duke, Duke! But I must be brave! It is my atonement!"

Raising her head, she took the letter, and sat down. For a moment she had not courage to break the seal. Finally, with an effort, she tore away the envelope; and, through blinding tears, read as follows:

"ETHEL:

"By the time you are reading this, I shall be far from Eaglehurst. I could not leave while you were in danger; but I think it better—kinder to both, as we must part—that we should not meet again. The interview would be too painful. Yet, should you wish it, I will see you; but how can the past be altered? Why did you so cruelly deceive me? Why keep so grave a secret from him you intended to make your husband? Yet, poor child! I cannot but pity you; for you sinned in ignorance. You really imagined this man dead when you promised to be my wife. And on that very day when you said 'Yes,' Ethel, I had in my possession the paper which explained the mistake that had been made between the—the two men; but, in my joy, forgot to

give it to you. Oh, if I had not, this present misery would have been spared us both.

"The happy days we have lived together, the good wife you were to me in those months, we each must try to forget. My bankers have orders to pay you three hundred a year. You may receive it quarterly, or how you please.

"Now there is yet another matter—our boy."

The young mother paused to dash the tears from her eyes. She could not see for them. Then she proceeded:

"His tender years make you his natural guardian; yet I leave it to your maternal love and wisdom to decide whether it will be better, kinder for the child, for you to take him, or leave him under my charge, where he may benefit from every advantage wealth can give.

"Should you desire to write to me in answer, my address for the next week will be the Hotel de l'Europe, Paris. But, if you would prefer to send any communication through my mother, she will readily receive it. Ethel, trust her. She likes you; she is your friend. You cannot have many, poor child; and surely you will want them. She will call on you to-day; she pities you. Farewell, oh, Ethel!—once I would have said my darling, but I may not—I dare not now! You know not—will never know—the agony this letter has caused me—the suppressing what I would for what I ought to say! Oh, Ethel! Heaven bless you; but would that we had never met!"

With that cry of suffering, as it were, the letter terminated.

By the time Ethel had read the last sentence her tears had ceased; her grief was too deep for them. The letter sounded unnecessarily severe; she hardly understood it.

"Oh, why is this burden mine?" she murmured. "So young—yes; so innocent—yet made to support so much! It is my punishment!" she added—"it is my atonement!"

Suddenly she remembered that sentence in the letter which said that Duke's step-mother would be there during the day. Ethel would have gone through with an interview with him, but not with her. Somehow she saw the dark, handsome face of Clarissa Harfield over Mrs. Sterndale's shoulder, as she had beheld it over Duke's that night at the mill.

The fear calmed, steadied her nerves. Duke must be answered, but it must be by letter, through no other medium.

Crossing to her davenport, she wrote:

"I cannot blame you—I may not—yet your sentence is severe. I had no right, with that grievous burden of disgrace on my shoulders, to let even its shadow fall on a name so old, so time-honored as yours. It was my sin, and I bow with resignation to my punishment.

"Had I any excuse? Yes; my love, my adoration for you. I feared to lose you. Silly woman! I had you for a few short months of happiness; now I have lost you forever. You hate me! I am to you only a woman who has disgraced you! Ah! present suffering exceeds past joy! Farewell! would I could hope you would soon forget me, and be happy! Farewell! When you think hardest of me, try to remember that my only temptation to err was my love for you—that can never alter. As you say, an interview would be useless. I suppose I confessed all I had to on that fearful night at the mill, but regarding that scene my brain is yet in a daze.

"As to our boy—our Marmaduke—I have already done him too much wrong, and will not stand in his way to advancement. Keep my name from him. Do not let him blush more for his mother than need be. I leave him with you, though it breaks my heart to quit him. Heaven guard you both. ETHEL."

This being sealed and addressed, she placed it in her pocket, and ascended to her room.

The nurse, glad of her liberty, was not there. Ethel's intention was to leave the Hall without delay before Mrs. Sterndale could arrive.

Her preparations were soon made, and she crossed the corridor to the nursery. The child's nurse sat with the baby on her lap, amusing him by jangling together some bright-colored beads. As they clashed and rebounded, the little fellow jumped, clapped his tiny hands, and crowed with delight.

His mirth sent a pang to Ethel's heart. Stooping, she took him in her arms, and would have pressed him to her bosom; but the child, with a fretful cry, turned from her, extending his little arms to the nurse and the bright beads.

"He, too, turns from me!" thought Ethel, as, with one passionate kiss, she gave him back to the woman.

"He is very fond of you, Jenkins," she said. "I hope Mr. Sterndale will keep you as Master Marmaduke's nurse until he no longer needs one."

"I hope so, too, ma'am," returned the other, surprised rather at the remark.

Then Ethel, quitting the nursery, went back to her own room and dressed. A fixed, stony expression was on her features, the effect of the violent repression of her feelings. She feared to give way.

When ready, she passed down to the drawing-room, and from thence to the grounds. Crossing the lawn, she entered the avenue, and hurried toward the gates.

It was April now, and the trees were already putting on their spring attire. The air was fresh and pleasant, the sky blue, and the birds in the branches beginning with their sweet notes to practice for summer.

Ethel, absorbed by her great sorrow, heeded nothing. Quickly she proceeded until nearing the lodge gates. Looking up, she halted, for coming along the road she saw the rector. Swiftly she passed between the avenue of trees, and concealed herself behind some high rhododendron-bushes. Breathlessly she waited.

She heard the iron gate roll back and close with a clang, then the rector's step on the firm gravel. Soon he passed. His hands were clasped behind his back, grasping his stick; his shoulders a little bowed; his eyes bent on the ground, a grave expression on his face.

He was going to see Ethel. He knew that Duke Sterndale had left that morning; and though she might be to blame, he could not help feeling pity for the poor girl left friendless and alone.

"It was I who brought her here," he reflected. "I cannot let her go forth desolate; she must have some place to go to."

But Ethel let him pass. How different might the next years have been had she seen him! When he was out of sight, round the curve of the avenue, she hastened on to the gate. Opening it, she passed through, and as it clanged behind her, hurried down the road, crossed a stile in the hedge, and, by a field-path, proceeded to the railway station.

The whistle of the up-train sounded as she entered the waiting-room. Procuring a ticket, she stepped out upon the platform as the train arrived. The porter held open the door of an empty carriage. She got in, and a moment after was being whirled away toward London.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### LONG, WEARY MONTHS.

THE events that had taken place at the mill, and which had so affected the Sterndales, filled Eaglehurst with excitement. In so small a village such an affair was not likely to grow cold in the proverbial nine days.

Secretly they were not a little proud of it, despite their outspoken horror and sympathy for "poor Mr. Sterndale," as the attempted capture and escape of the notorious convict, Edward Vaughan, had given a wonderful importance to the place.

Not a paper but had a full account of it—of the daring descent by the mill sails, the flight across country, and pursuit. Over and over again "the police had a clew," and "the police were on the convict's track." The newspaper notices never went beyond that. The "clew" and the "track" both led to nothing.

Edward Vaughan had escaped; he was free; and Chief Constable Follett was, in lieu of being fifty pounds richer, rather in disgrace for having let the convict slip through his fingers.

This was rather aggravating to a man who had done his best.

Chief Constable Follett determined to do something, therefore set about finding the writer of the anonymous letter he had received.

The post-mark showed it had been posted in Eaglehurst itself.

By whom?

No suspicious persons had been seen about, save Edward Vaughan himself. The writing was carefully inspected. If there were signs of disguise about it, the bad spelling at any rate indicated a most ignorant person.

Who else except one who had an enmity against the convict would have given the in-



formation respecting him? And who would have an enmity against him but one of his own associates?

Hence it could be no one at Eaglehurst.

Nevertheless, a reward of ten pounds was offered for the apprehension of the writer of the anonymous communication.

Clarissa Harfield gave herself small concern respecting the matter. No one was likely to suspect her. What interest could she, in the public mind, have in the arrest of Edward Vaughan?

She clothed her face with a suitable melancholy as she moved about the Dower House, waiting for frequent bulletins from the Hall, sometimes riding over herself anxiously to inquire.

But secretly her heart was full of triumph.

The sun shone more brightly to her eyes than it had done for months.

Her hope, waited for so long, had been at last accomplished.

Duke and Ethel were parted.

Never again could they be anything to each other. Even the publicity of a divorce was not necessary, for the schoolmistress had never been his wife.

During Ethel's long illness Clarissa almost wished that she would die. It would have rendered everything so safe with so little trouble.

The honest chivalry of Duke's nature at times made her uneasy, for none could look at the change in him and doubt how deep had been his passion for Ethel.

But her cousin soon set her mind at rest on that point.

When the doctor announced that the fever had left and Ethel would live, Duke, appearing at the Dower House with the news, had stated it to be his intention to quit the Hall for the Continent, and, if Ethel left the boy with him, to confide Marmaduke to his mother and cousin's care.

"That is, mother," said the wretched husband, "if you would not find the task too arduous!"

"My dear Duke!—as if I would not sacrifice anything for you, my poor boy!" sighed Mrs. Sterndale. "It would not be possible to describe how my heart has bled for you in this calamitous affair!"

"Thanks! I know that! And, mother, give some pity also to poor Ethel. If she is to be blamed, surely, too, she deserves a little sympathy!"

"I don't know what there is about Ethel, but she wins people's hearts whether they like it or no, and I am very, very sorry for her! I'll do anything for her in her lamentable position that I can!"

"Heaven bless you for that, mother!" had replied Duke Sterndale, much moved. "I shall take care she does not want; and it will be a comfort to me to know she has a friend in you. Poor child! she will sadly need one!"

"I'll drive over and see her after you are gone," remarked Mrs. Sterndale; adding, as the tall, graceful figure of her niece came toward them, "Clarissa, if poor Ethel will surrender Marmaduke's guardianship to his papa, Duke wishes us to take care of the darling."

"Willingly," responded Clarissa, with a pleased look, judiciously tinged by sadness. "You may be sure, cousin, the dear boy shall receive an aunt's most loving attention from me. The Dower House"—with a half-suppressed sigh—"is not likely to be over gay. How could it be when you are far from us and in trouble? So the presence of Marmie will be a distraction—a bright oasis in our lives."

"I knew I could trust in you, Clarissa," Duke said, pressing her hand affectionately. "I shall leave Marmaduke and everything under your care: and I am sure you will keep me constantly informed as to my boy, and—and all else."

"Rely on me, Duke. I will write daily, if you wish. But will you be long away?"

"I cannot tell; I think so. England, and Eaglehurst especially, can have small charms or attractions for me."

So Duke went, as it had been stated; and before Mrs. Sterndale was ready to proceed to the Hall, the rector arrived with the intelligence that Ethel also had gone.

Ordering the carriage, Mrs. Sterndale, with Clarissa, at once drove over to fetch the child. There was an oppressive stillness in the Hall, which so lately had been full of happy sunshine.

"It is very sad," whimpered Mrs. Sterndale; "and all might have gone on so well but for that man. Why ever did he turn up?"

"My dear aunt," ejaculated the niece, with virtuous horror, "surely you would not have had Ethel remain here as Duke's wife, and her first husband still living?"

"Goodness gracious, Clarissa! what are you saying?" cried the lady, with irritable snappishness. "How dreadful! Of course not. I meant I wish he had only been kind enough to have died, as it was believed he had, upon those rocks."

"Then you would have had no objection to Duke's having had a convict's widow for a wife?" said her niece, with a scornful curl of her lip.

"How you do speak, Clarissa! Would it not have been better never to have discovered the truth than to have the happiness of a family broken up, our name disgraced, and poor Duke, broken-hearted, banished from his native land?"

"He will get over it, aunt. Time cures all wounds."

"I don't know that, Clarissa. He loved Ethel devotedly, as he ought, for she was a good, fond wife to him; and as things are, and can't be helped, I don't mind confessing I liked the girl far better than I appeared to do."

"I'll go and fetch Marmaduke," broke in Clarissa, full of indignant contempt at her aunt's weakness.

She felt no regret as she passed through the deserted rooms; on the contrary, a smile hovered over her lips.

Clarissa Harfield was by no means an unskillful schemer. The best way to the father's heart she felt was through the child. Hence Marmaduke became her constant companion, while her letters overflowed with anecdotes of his infantile sayings and doings.

The writer knew they would please; but it was not in her nature to divine the depths of the pleasure they gave.

Duke kept them always in his breast coat pocket, and read them a dozen times, especially that one in which, answering his question, Clarissa had to confess the boy slightly resembled his mother.

His poor mother!

What could have become of her? What was she doing?

Duke would have given the world, had it been his, to know; but all the secret inquiries he had made had ended in failure.

Often, in his lonely wanderings, he wondered if they might ever meet again. His pet hope, the offspring of the constant craving at his heart, said "Yes!" His reason said, "Better no—for both!"

So months passed. The Hall, a landmark of the county, reflected in the silvery lake shuttered and curtained windows.

"Really," remarked Mrs. Sterndale, complainingly, "Duke ought to come back. He has been quite long enough away for people to forget that unpleasant affair. I do wish he would return. Clarissa, when you next write, do tell him I wish it. Holding the position he does in the county, he should not let the Hall be so long shut up."

Her niece said she would write the next day, and did not fail to keep her promise. She wrote from her heart, for she longed trebly as much as Mrs. Sterndale for Duke's return.

The answer came in due course.

The writer felt far too unsettled in mind to support the idea of returning to the Hall at present.

"Had I a brother to whom I could hand it and its responsibilities," he wrote, "save to visit my mother

and you, Clarissa, I do not think I should ever return again to England; for, when old enough, Marmaduke would join me here, where—poor little lad!—his and his parents' disgrace would never be known. I shudder when I think the day must come—that day on which the Hall will pass into other hands than his—when he must be told it."

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Sterndale; "the only thing that would bring Duke to Eaglehurst, I believe, would be if Marmaduke were ill and in danger."

Clarissa looked quickly up.

She had never thought of that, though pinning through these weary months for her cousin's return. She had begun to think, with her aunt, that nothing would bring him—that her schemes must fail; but of course, were his child in peril, he would fly to England at once.

But Marmaduke grew strong and hearty, showing no disposition to catch illnesses. Twice did whooping-cough rage at Eaglehurst, and he would have nothing to do with it.

At last, however, measles came, and among the earliest to take them was poor little Marmie.

At first they were so light that the doctor laughed at the idea of alarming Duke. But suddenly the illness took an unfavorable turn, and he said perhaps it would be wisest to inform the father.

With tremulous eagerness, Clarissa sat down to write. She was rejoiced. Duke was coming back, and surely he could not fail to be grateful for the care she had taken of his boy—her son.

Hardly, however, had she touched pen to paper, than Mrs. Sterndale entered with a letter just arrived from Duke.

It was written hurriedly, stating that he was about to quit Nice; that he had made the acquaintance of a lady and gentleman whose party he was going to join to visit Athens.

"At present," he wrote, "I am not aware where we shall stop or what my address will be; but in a few days I will let you know. By the way," he added, "my new friends have a daughter traveling with them so like Ethel that I was quite overcome on first seeing her."

The letter altogether was composed in a more cheerful spirit than he had ever written before since his absence. Clarissa, biting her lip, wondered if this "daughter" was the cause—if here was a new rival?

Before Duke's next letter arrived their son was out of danger, and progressing toward recovery.

There was no need to bring the father back. Other months passed away, and Duke was yet traveling with the Grays.

"Of course," reflected Clarissa, with angry bitterness, "the daughter is the attraction."

She did not discover until much later that she whom she hated as a rival, was an engaging, beautiful little maiden of eleven.

Soon after that Duke wrote, hinting, to Clarissa's great joy, the possibility of his return shortly to Eaglehurst.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE LETTER FROM AMERICA.

OVER two years had elapsed, when, one fine afternoon, Duke Sterndale rode slowly up the avenue to the Hall. Only the day previously he had returned to England, and as yet not even his step-mother was aware of his arrival.

He had felt that he must enter his own home without witnesses. Alone, he must accustom himself to the appearance of the rooms without Ethel. His baby eyes had opened at the Hall: he had grown from childhood to manhood there; but no recollection was so vivid as the presence of his young wife. In his imagination she haunted every spot. Her graceful figure seemed to glide through every room, with a soft, golden halo about it, as though the spirit of one much loved and long since dead. And was she not dead to him? Since the receipt of her letter Duke had never, during these two years, heard from or seen her. The idea of her being penniless, toiling for her daily bread, had filled him with deep concern and pain, for he loved her. Yes, no woman could ever be as dear to him as she had been.



All his search and inquiry, however, had proved futile. Ethel seemed to possess the art of hiding herself beyond discovery.

Every window of the Hall was shuttered when Duke rung at the entrance door, which was opened by the gardener's wife, who had been left in charge. The woman stared at him in surprise, and began to apologize for "things not being prepared;" but quieting her by saying he had not come to remain, Duke passed on.

"Lor', dear, now," reflected the woman, glancing after him, "but how changed he is! He looks ten years older, if a day, and as grave as my old man when he's a-reading them pollytic things in the paper."

The trees were throwing long shadows eastward across the lawn when Duke quitted the Hall, and rode now at a quicker pace to the Dower House. Life and love were awaiting him there in his boy, who, he had heard from Clarissa's frequent letters, had grown quite a tall, noble little fellow.

The ladies were in the drawing-room, waiting the announcement of dinner, when Duke unexpectedly walked in.

"Duke!" cried Mrs. Sterndale. "Good gracious! Why, my dear, did you not write and let us know you were coming?"

"Why should I have done so, and given you the trouble of preparing for my advent?" he smiled. "I dare say you can give me a bed here until the Hall is made ready?"

Clarissa had said nothing. She had risen quickly on her cousin's entrance, first turning pale, then red; but as he took her hand, the light on her handsome features expressed the joy she felt at his return better than words.

"Where is my boy?" asked Duke; and Clarissa ran to fetch him, soon returning with the child in her arms. Poor Duke could hardly control his emotion, for the boy, much grown and very handsome, greatly resembled Ethel.

"Does Marmaduke know papa?" he asked, as he took the child and fondly kissed him.

"Oh, 'es," was the answer, as the arms were put round the parent's neck. "Marmie knows papa—tors papa's pitter der;" and the tiny hand pointed to the album on the table. "Tussin 'Rissa show Marmie it every day, and Marmie tiss it like diss."

Duke held his hand to his cousin, and said, gratefully, "Thank you, Clarissa."

The latter's cheek flushed, her lip trembled with pleasure. Duke thought she had never looked so beautiful. Upon such an occasion as the present, Master Marmaduke was permitted to be present at the family dinner. Duke would not have him out of his sight. He even kept him after the ladies had retired, and brought him afterward into the drawing-room, mounted on his shoulder, crowing with delight. Then nothing would content Master Marmie but to be seated at the table to find papa's "pitter in the bid book."

"Der—der 'tis!" he cried, in delight; "'stache an' all! An' der tussin 'Riss. An' der papa's mamma!" Suddenly he paused, and, lifting his large eyes, with an expression that was Ethel's own, said, "But where Marmie's mamma? Marmie no see her in bid book."

Duke turned quickly away to conceal his emotion.

Clarissa perceiving it, bent over the child, and said, softly, "Marmie's mamma is dead."

"Dead!" ejaculated Duke, quickly facing round. "No; Marmie's mamma is alive. One day he may see her. Clarissa," he added, "do you imagine I would prevent Ethel's ever seeing her child?"

When the boy, wearied out, had been relegated to his nursery, Mrs. Sterndale said, "Duke, do you remember telling me that, did any letters come to—to Ethel, I was not to let you know without there was necessity, but was myself to open them?"

"Yes," he answered. "Were there any?"

"Yes, two; they came from America. They are here."

Taking them, he looked at the address and date. "To Mrs. Marmaduke Sterndale." The

post-mark was the 30th June, and "Private" was written round the seal. The other was also marked "New York," but of a much later date.

The first ran:

"DEAR ETHEL:—I haven't received that promised fifty yet. Perhaps you haven't been able to send it. Well, I must do without it. You're a good girl; the only one I ever met who was worth anything. I was awfully sorry for you that night at the mill. Of course, all is known now; so there's no need of secrecy, else I shouldn't have written. It wasn't my fault; was it? I would have stayed to help you, and have been ready to swear to or deny anything to prevent the truth coming out, but how could I with the police at my heels? I'm anxious, though, about you. I want to know how Mr. Sterndale took the news; so, mind you write, dear. The address I formerly gave you will find me.

"Yours affectionately,  
"EDWARD VAUGHAN."

With compressed lips Duke opened the other. It contained but a few hurried lines.

"MY DEAR ETHEL:—Why have not you written? what has become of you? Has your husband forgiven you? He might, for I am as dead to him and you as if I had really died on the Portland rocks. I don't know what address now to give you, as I'm off across country. Ethel, I have turned over a new leaf; I am practicing honesty. As yet it promises success. Should Mr. Sterndale prove unkind, you shall always find a home with

"EDWARD VAUGHAN."

Duke crushed the letters in his hand, then thrust them in his pocket. He needed to make no comment upon them.

A fortnight after Duke's return, he went back to the Hall, bringing with him his step-mother and cousin.

A glow of exquisite satisfaction animated Clarissa when she once again took possession of her old rooms. Would she ever have to quit them again for the Dower House? She believed it very unlikely. True, Duke was very reticent regarding his private feelings, but never had his manner been so kind; while Marmie loved her so dearly. Duke would naturally in time outgrow his grief, and, of course, for his family's sake, marry again.

Not only did this idea also enter Mrs. Sterndale's brain, but that of all Eaglehurst.

Duke and Clarissa rode together, walked together, drove together, as they had done before Ethel had come between them. Marmaduke could not have loved her more, Eaglehurst affirmed, had she really been his own mother; while where could the young squire find a handsomer and more suitable wife than his cousin?

Eaglehurst, in fact, considered it a settled affair, and whispered that they were engaged. The only one in total ignorance of what was going on was Duke himself.

He liked Clarissa better than ever before. He believed that in what she had done in the past she had been actuated solely by her regard for him; he was grateful for her love and care of his boy, and the delicate way she avoided any remark that might seem like a reproach to Ethel. But the thought of wedding her had never entered his mind, and in all probability never would have done so but for Mrs. Sterndale, who, after affairs had proceeded thus for nearly a twelvemonth, thought it kind, for her niece's sake, that an understanding should be come to.

Duke listened with pain and annoyance when his step-mother, one morning, entering the library where he sat alone, informed him of what all Eaglehurst was saying.

"Does Eaglehurst say that?—that we are engaged?" he exclaimed, angrily. "What right has Eaglehurst to meddle in my concerns? If I ride and walk with Clarissa, is she not my cousin? Have we not been reared from childhood together? I hate these gossiping country towns, and have half a mind to go back to the Continent."

"My dear Duke, do be reasonable," put in Mrs. Sterndale. "What Eaglehurst says or thinks is really natural. You represent a county family which has reigned here for nearly two centuries. You hold the rank, as it were, of a lord of the manor, and, as such, a certain number of receptions, dinners, and

parties are expected, at which a hostess is requisite."

"Cannot Clarissa, as my cousin, act the part?"

"No one better, if matters could only remain as they are."

"Why should they not?" queried Duke.

"Because, my dear, we are mortal. Were I to die—and I am far from young"—a sigh—"Clarissa would, of course, have at once to seek another home. Then poor Marmie, how he would miss her, if you did not!"

"I should miss her very much," cried Duke, irritably, rising and pacing the long room. "She has been very kind and good. The Hall would go to ruin, I suspect, without her supervision. Indeed, she is too good for me, mother. I like her, but to love her would be impossible. With me, to love once is to love ever."

"You mean—"

"That I love Ethel Vaughan still!" he exclaimed. "Battling against it as I will, her remembrance conquers me. I love her, and must while I have life. What would Clarissa say to such a husband?"

"I fancy, Duke, she feels so sincere an affection for you and your boy, that she would overlook it if being your wife would be to your advantage. Besides, by her amiability and affection she might hope to receive at last some love in return. And, Duke, do think of your position as master of Sterndale—of the possibility of my death. Think, too, of poor Clarissa; her position may not be without pain."

"What do you mean, mother?" he asked, swinging round.

"Why should I not tell you?" responded Mrs. Sterndale; "for, Duke, I know you to be a man of honor, and that, however you may decide, you will respect the secret I am about to confide to your honor. Clarissa loves you—loved you before you had ever seen Ethel Vaughan."

"Is it possible?" ejaculated Duke. Then: "Leave me, mother! Let me think over what you have said! Give me a week to decide. Believe me, I will endeavor to please you and Eaglehurst by doing my duty as a Sterndale. At present, tell no one of this conversation."

"Of course not, my dear."

But Mrs. Sterndale, without actually breaking that promise, insinuated so much to her niece that the latter's heart throbbed with joy and triumph.

Duke took the whole week nearly to consider. That any one—even Clarissa—should fill Ethel's place was particularly repugnant to him. Yet Mrs. Sterndale's arguments had been well chosen. Possibly it was his duty to act as his step-mother desired, not only for his position, but also for his boy's sake.

"I will propose a ride, and speak to Clarissa to-day," he reflected, one morning, when descending to breakfast. "I will confess—I will tell her the whole truth; then if she will have me—well, be it so!"

The first thing Duke always did on taking his seat at the breakfast-table was to open the letter-bag.

Doing so on the present occasion, he found a letter from America, addressed to Ethel, in a strange hand.

Nervously he removed the envelope, and, with blended feelings, read the following, which, though evidently traced by a feeble hand, was in Edward Vaughan's writing:

"MY DEAR ETHEL:—I am dying. I could not, however, part with life without sending a word to let you know—to ask you to forgive the past! You may not regret a death which removes such a black sheep as I was from your path—yes, 'as I was,' for, Ethel—and this I know will please you—I have lived to become a respectable member of society, and to acknowledge that 'honesty is the best policy.' I am married, too, to one of the best and kindest of little wives; and I have so worked that I do not leave her destitute. My strength is going! The doctor was right; I am not equal to the task! Good-by! Forgive me! Heaven bless you, Eth—"

The writing toward the close had become almost illegible. At the end a blot followed the half-finished word, as if the pen had fallen from the fingers of the writer.



A postscript was added in a woman's hand, and tears had blurred the page:

"My dear husband died two hours ago. Surely you would forgive if you knew how good and how greatly beloved he was!"

"KATHERINE VAUGHAN."

As Duke ended, he could not restrain a great cry of joy.

"Good gracious, my dear! what is it?" ejaculated Mrs. Sterndale.

"Edward Vaughan is dead!" answered Duke, his voice broken with emotion. "Ethel is free!"

As Clarissa Harfield heard those words, and looked in her cousin's face, she knew that all hope of being Mrs. Marmaduke Sterndale was gone from her forever.

That day Marmie waited in vain for his "tussin 'Rissa" to visit him as usual in his nursery. She had something more to think of than "the pleasure"—they were her own mental words—"of the child of that woman!"

## CHAPTER X.

### THE SECRET TOLD.

DUKE took his step-mother by surprise when he asserted that, even if his inclination did not urge him, he should hold it as a matter of duty to find Ethel, and really make her his wife; that while she lived and was free he had no right to give another mother to his boy.

This time Mrs. Sterndale argued in vain. Duke adhered to his resolution.

"I hold," he said, "that, save in keeping her story untold, Ethel is innocent of blame, and merits pity. She never consented to be mine until she believed Edward Vaughan had ceased to exist; and when all was discovered, did she not meekly, without murmur, bow to my sentence? Did she not sacrifice her own affection for Marmaduke's advantage? Was ever mother so unselfish or so brave? Think of the penury, the suffering, mental and physical, she must have experienced on leaving this place."

"And you, Duke, will bring her back here?"

"Most surely, if I find her," was the resolute response.

All that Duke had ascertained respecting Ethel, after she had quitted the Hall, was that she had gone to London. Therefore, he would make the metropolis the center of his search.

He proceeded thither on the same day that he had received Edward Vaughan's letter, taking with him his boy, of whom he could not bear to lose sight even for a moment.

No sooner had he installed himself in rooms in Wimpole street, than he began his search.

There was not a paper in which he did not advertise, not a governess institution to which he did not apply, while he procured the services of two of the ablest private detectives.

All, however, was in vain. Not a trace of Ethel could be discovered.

Ten months went by, when a new trouble was added to Duke's burden. Marmaduke was taken seriously ill, and the doctor declared him to be suffering with scarlet fever.

Then for a time Duke forgot Ethel. Now he never left the house, but either sat by the bed of the little sufferer, or paced the room beneath, listening to every sound.

"I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Sterndale," remarked the brusque but kindly medical man, "if matters go on like this, I shall have two patients on my hands instead of one. I shall send a nurse to-day, and you must consent to leave every thing in her hands. Cease so frequently to visit the sick-room, and take proper rest."

It was hard for the father to surrender his charge to another; but he saw the wisdom of the advice, and consented.

That same day the nurse, or "Sister," as she was called, arrived. She was a woman of about five and thirty, with a pleasant, kindly countenance; and somehow as, attired in her plain, neat costume or garb, she moved about the sick-room, a feeling of peace and calm

fell over it, that brought hope to the other watchers.

Days passed, yet the hot gripe of fever was on the child. Sister Alice had forbidden Duke's presence in the apartment, save at those times when he had received her permission to enter it; and Duke quietly obeyed, for he had a reverence for this pleasant fresh-faced woman, who seemed to hold his son's life in her soft, plump, white hands.

It was a terrible period for Duke, seated alone in the room below, waiting hour after hour for the verdict, listening to every step on the stair that was to bring him news, for in a day or two, the doctor had affirmed, the result—life or death—would be decided.

Mrs. Sterndale, who had a horror of contagious diseases, had but faintly offered her service, which Duke had declined. Clarissa had made no offer at all.

One evening, Duke, as usual, sat by himself, too anxious for any thing save thought. Doctor Pelham had taken his departure half an hour ago, promising to call first thing in the morning, as before midnight the crisis would have passed.

The clock had just struck ten when Duke, unable to remain where he was, rose, and stole noiselessly up-stairs. For some little while he had heard no sound in the sick-room. What could it mean? Was Marmaduke dying, and they feared to tell him?

Placing his ear to the panel, he listened. Not a sound—all silent. Hark! what was that? It seemed like a sob!

Duke staggered, leaning against the wall for support. Then, turning the handle, entered.

The room was darkened, but the shaded lamp gave sufficient light to show the little bed, from which all drapery had been removed, the small, fair, baby-head on the pillow, and the figure of the nurse kneeling by the couch. Her hands were clasped, her face buried on the coverlet. Was she praying for his dying child?

Slowly he approached, when, the floor creaking beneath his tread, the Sister turned.

With a low cry of alarm, she rose quickly; then recoiled from him, ejaculating, her hands clasped, "Oh, Heaven! my husband! Pardon, pardon! I heard he was dying—I could not help but come!"

Duke Sterndale was transfixed, but only for a second. Ere she could fall on her knees before him he had darted forward, taking her in his arms.

"Oh, Ethel—oh, my darling!" he cried, gazing on the pale, sad features beneath the Sister's cap. "Is it you? Have I found you at last? Do we meet by the bedside of our boy?"

"What words are these?" gasped Ethel.

"Am I dreaming? There is great joy in your looks, Duke. Can it be that you forgive the past? Oh, my husband—"

"Dearest," whispered he, as he drew her closer, "he, your husband, is dead. Ethel, you are free, and I have the right to love you now."

Seeming bewildered, she freed herself from his embrace, and gazed at him.

"Duke," she exclaimed, "what are you saying? I do not understand! My husband dead! Are you not here before me?"

"Yes, darling," he answered; "but I meant the man who came between us—your first husband—Edward Vaughan!"

"Edward Vaughan my husband!" she ejaculated. "Oh, Duke, Duke, what terrible mistake is this? Who has so dared to deceive you? Edward Vaughan was my sinful—my unhappy brother!"

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed Duke; then, stunned, could say no more.

There was silence in the apartment for some minutes. It was broken by the light footfall of Sister Alice. Ethel moved quickly back from Duke. As the nurse entered, her pleasant face showed anger.

"What is the meaning of this, Sister Vener?" she said. "I permitted you to come

here to-night at your earnest pleading, conditional on your following my directions, and keeping every one from the room."

"You must not blame her," said Duke. "Sister Alice, you have done a great service to both of us, and have earned our eternal gratitude."

Sister Alice looked from one to the other.

"She is the child's mother?" she said. "I suspected it. I always at the hospital knew Sister Vener was a lady. But, Mr. Sterndale, I have a duty here that nothing must interrupt—my patient. Silence, or quit the room."

So saying, Sister Alice, approaching the bed, leaned over the little occupant. Rising quickly, she stepped to the table, removed the shade from the lamp, then came back.

Breathlessly the parents watched her. In her fear, Ethel almost unconsciously clung to Duke's arm. Had the child died during their great joy at meeting?

Sister Alice turned, and said, "The crisis is past. He sleeps; the fever is gone, and he will live."

Ethel, uttering a low cry of gratitude, sunk into the arms of Duke, opened to receive her.

Half an hour later, in the sitting-room, by her husband's side, the young wife disclosed the secret that, long since told, would have prevented so much misery.

"The Reverend Archibald Vaughan, minister of Sefton-on-the-Moors, had had two children, the favorite being his handsome, intelligent son Edward. As the fond father watched the boy's quickness and intellect, his pride increased, and he marked out a brilliant future for the lad. That no obstacle might be placed in the way of this son's advancement, he sacrificed many of his own comforts and Ethel's advantages, save in education, to rear Edward as a gentleman."

"He was sent to Oxford. His appearance, talent, and especially his sociable qualities, soon made him a favorite with those who preferred dissipation to study."

"Edward Vaughan was not one to think of those at home. He had been sent among gentlemen, and must live like them. Debts poured in, which the clergyman found it difficult to pay. His letters of remonstrance were not heeded. His one hope was the coming examination. Edward, who had stood with ease at the top of every school in which he had been, would surely prove successful now."

"The examination arrived. Edward Vaughan was plucked. The next term owing to his misconduct, he was rusticated."

"Either from shame or disinclination to face the dull humdrum life of Sefton-on-the-Moors, he refused to return there, but went to London."

"The only times when the disappointed, heart-broken father and loving sister heard from him were when he asked for money."

"Mr. Vaughan indignantly refused. Then the request took the character of threats. Why had he been reared like a gentleman when he had not the means to live like one? If the money were not sent, he might try to obtain some in a way that his father might not think quite reputable."

"The money was sent," proceeded Ethel. "But papa, though much shattered in health, made a secret journey to London to learn what Edward was doing—how living."

"When he returned he looked ten years older. All that he had discovered he would not tell me. He said I could not understand; and it was well I could not. It sufficed for me to know that he was a gambler, a tavern-frequenter, living on his wits, and utterly unworthy of either his love or mine."

"Two months went by, during which my poor father grew weaker. He was the only one I had to love—my sole friend; and, when I looked upon him slowly fading away, oh, you cannot tell how I hated Edward! I would have given my life willingly could I have said that he was not my brother. Being his sister, I believed his disgrace equally rested on me,



and that, if known, the world would shun me, too.

"Well, a letter arrived demanding a certain sum to keep him (Edward) out of the work-house. My father returned it, saying he would live more honestly there than out of it.

"Two nights after, while I sat at work, I heard a cry from the little study where my father prepared his sermons. Then came a heavy fall.

"In terror, I rushed in, and found my father on the floor in a fit. I was too alarmed to notice at the moment that the glass doors were wide apart, and the escritoire open.

"My screams brought the only servant we had, who, after assisting me to raise my father onto a chair, ran for help and a doctor. Before either came my father had recovered.

"First he looked wildly round; then into my face as his gray head rested on my bosom, and, pointing to the open window and escritoire, whispered, 'Edward—here.'

"Dear father," I cried, 'what do you mean? Edward been here?'

"Yes—money—robbed!"

"Then the truth flashed on me. All his little savings my father kept in a drawer of the escritoire, with some articles of jewelry that had belonged to my mother. Edward knew this, and had, coming down to Sefton, taken them, or was taking them, perhaps, when my father, unhappily for him, came upon his unnatural son.

"As I remembered how I had found my father, I turned cold, for I feared Edward had committed a far greater crime.

"Oh, father," I cried, 'did he strike you?'

"Not with his hand," he answered; 'but, Ethel, he has struck me a mortal blow here,' pressing his hand over his heart, 'that I shall not long survive. Oh, Edward!—oh, my son!' he added with a bitter cry; then lay with closed eyes upon my breast, breathing heavily. Suddenly he looked up and spoke: 'Ethel, my darling, what is to become of you? Oh, my child! Yet, you are so good, I feel that Heaven will protect you. Only leave here! Hide yourself from him! Do not let his shadow longer darken your path! Disown him—forget him! You will have to work, poor child; but it will take you among new people and new scenes. Never mind how humble the employment, if it be honest. Only hide from Edward, for he would bring upon you ruin and disgrace. Heaven bless you, dear!'

"Those were his last words," said Ethel, who was crying quietly.

Duke drew her to him, as he said, fondly, "Dearest, your father was right. Heaven has cared for you, for it has restored you, I trust, to happiness!"

After a space, Ethel proceeded:

"After my father's funeral, I immediately acted on his advice. I determined to hide myself from my brother. I had seen in my father's parish how retired was the life of a country national schoolmistress. It was the very last capacity in which Edward would expect to find me. So I entered myself in one of the Government training schools, and had not been there a week before I heard, by accident, that Edward had been arrested for forgery, and sentenced to a long imprisonment at Portland. Now, Duke, you know all. Would that you had learned it long before!"

"Not all, love. When you left the Hall?" he said.

"My mind was already made up. I felt too broken-spirited for teaching, and thought I should best find alleviation of my own suffering by assuaging that of others. So I entered one of the hospitals as a child's nurse. I preferred children, remembering my boy. Sister Alice was one of the nurses I had always liked for her pleasant and amiable manner, and when by chance I heard who it was that she was nursing here—how my Marmaduke was in danger—I felt that I should go mad if I did not see him once again.

"I called and saw Sister Alice, and pleaded so earnestly to be allowed to assist her for a

few hours at a time, when there was no likelihood of my meeting you, that, as you have heard, she half suspected my secret."

"No secret now, dearest. Never again must there be any between us," said her husband. "Ethel, my wife, will you come back to the Hall?"

"Duke," she murmured, joyfully, "you are too good. But think—"

"Why should you be made to suffer for a brother's crime? Ethel, would you doom Marmaduke and me to live there alone?"

"No, Duke," she answered; "not if you will let me come too."

Five years have elapsed. Clarissa Harfield is married, and gone far away to reside. The Dower House is again shut up, or let, for Mrs. Sterndale thinks it more comfortable to sit on the pleasant terrace of the Hall in the sunshine, busy with her crewels or other work, and watching the gambols of her grandchildren—there are three now—on the lawn.

To Ethel it was rather strange coming home at first; but the good rector—always her friend—prepared Eaglehurst so skillfully for her reception, that she found kindly sympathy and pity awaiting her, instead of coldness and curiosity. Thus has the dark shadow of an untold secret passed from her life, which, as a proud mother and happy wife, promises to be as bright as the sunshine, which ever seems most brilliant when it rests on Sterndale Hall.

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